The Dirt Cheap Desert Homestead

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"'Tis better to be trampled out by asses' hoofs than to be the thing that asses' mind approves." — John Masefield, quoted in *Linotype's Shining Lines*, December 1937

"I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." — Henry David Thoreau

"The chief value of money lies in the fact that one lives in a world in which it is overestimated." — H. L. Mencken, *A Menchken Chrestomathy*

"No man who knows aught, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free." — Milton

"Society highly values its normal man. It educates children to lose themselves and to become absurd, and thus be normal.

Normal men have killed perhaps 100,000,000 of their fellow normal men in the last fifty years." — R. D. Laing

"We would know mankind better if we were not so anxious to resemble one another." — Goethe

"Less is more." — Mies Van Der Rohe

Chapter One
Introduction

How desperation, joblessness, a flat wallet, and the sin of pride drove me into the desert like a pariah. And how I built a modest house for almost nothing and lived more or less comfortably.

I became a desert homesteader after I got fired from my last job. Homesteading in the burning waste is a new deal for me, but I've been shit-canned many times. My deportment irks employers. I guess it's a kind of hauteur. Kind of a cocky, supercilious, cheeky insolence, or an overweening and querulous hubris. I tend to repeat myself, too, and have a flashy vocabulary.

Anyway, this time after getting sacked, I started revolving toward this idea. Instead of donning somebody else's livery again, I'd try my luck as a stalwart, self-sufficient, and modern pioneer who didn't need a regular job. I already owned some acres in a remote desert valley in rural Imperial County. A few years ago, while working as a reporter for a Southern California newspaper, I'd done a story about the annual tax-default land auction there. One of the parcels on the block was ten acres way out in the Colorado Desert, with an unbelievable opening bid of $100. To make it short, I chimed in, and wound up getting the ten acres for $325.

A friend dubbed the property *Rancho Costa Nada*. It didn't really cost *nada*, but it certainly didn't cost very mucha. The property lies in the middle of a monotonous, baked-dry alkali basin that's arid, scrub-covered, lacking in amenities and way the hell off the paved road.

Despite all that, folks do live out there in the valley. True desert homesteaders, such as the Tukes family, hole up among a laager of trailers in the hollow of a barren hillside, where the ingenious son and dad spend their days tinkering with an improvised fleet of Mad Max-style desert carts and buggies. There's also the irascible, touchy J.R., who finances his set of cannibalized sand rails by illegally salvaging brass casings from the nearby Chocolate Mountain Naval Aerial Gunnery Range. There are many other settlers too, like the Hobo, the Demented Vet, Baby Huey, Mystery Woman, and Alba the Dog Lady. Indian Phil used to live out there too, but he's in prison now for shooting the finger off a deputy.

Admittedly, it seemed like madness for me to try the homesteading thing. Nobody encouraged me. My sister said, "Is this some kind of *religious experience*? Are you going to be hawking tracts at the bus station? Because if that's it, forget about coming to my house for Christmas."

I'm a rugged individualist only in theory. I have none of the practical mechanical or survival skills of the Tukes, J.R., or the Hobo. Some of the other inhabitants of the valley may be just as misanthropic and anti-social as I am, but they're also handy and self-reliant. I'm more a conceptualizer, but I'm also a big reader. Before I moseyed out to develop my scatter in the sun-basted

beyond, I boned up on the desert pioneers. I visited all the web sites catering to homesteaders, survivalists, and back-to-the-land romantics. At the very least, I took with me a lot of intellectual hardware. It turned out a lot of the cute ideas I lifted from books pretty much flopped in practice.

Because of my limited tool-wielding abilities, the homestead I wound up with is decidedly low-tech. It was based on simple ideas that any mope could figure out without much need for luck or skill. Nor did my modest abode call for inordinate grunt labor — I'm way too lazy for that. Its real attraction for me? It was dirt cheap. It had to be, because when I went out to the Smoke Tree Valley, I was pretty much busted. For building, I used salvaged materials or stuff picked up from garage sales. No loans, no mortgage. No permit fees, since I didn't pull any permits, and (as far as I know) it's all legal.

Naturally, few people are going to want to follow my example buying worthless land for almost nothing at an auction, and then building a hogan and compound for a few hundred bucks out of scrounged material. My sister sees my "encampment" in the waterless Sahara as a nut-bar deal suitable only for recluses and cranks who need a quiet place to make letter bombs. She says that my experiment in simple living is no high-minded Thoreau-vian examination of core values, but rather the stigmata of *a serious character flaw*. That's her opinion.

Most other people — in saying why they wouldn't be interested — cite a reluctance to suffer hardship. Rancho Costa Nada is innocent of alternating current, plumbing, tap water, and convenient shopping (seventeen miles to pavement, forty-five to a Kmart). So far, I haven't experienced any hardship personally. Pain, yes, when I hit my thumb with the hammer. And sometimes boredom. That's why I travel a lot. But nothing in the building or maintenance of the dirt cheap homestead has been difficult. Any common mope can do it, as I've proved.

Understandably, only a few adventurous freedom-seekers or surly malcontents actually will want to try this. The following chapters may appeal most to the fantasy life of city-bound wage serfs who dream of shucking the mindless job and the asshole boss, ditching the teeming fellow widgets and the nightmare commute, and in doing so in favor of what might seem like (and for me, sort of is) a placid life of leisure and self-sufficiency. These countless yoked minions of the world aren't any handier than I am and don't have big bank accounts either. But, see, it's really possible to get land for practically nothing (as long as it has no water and is basically worthless) and then live on it in a comfortable little hogan, with a few cute, inventive but simple amenities, again for almost nothing. Best of all, there is no cretin taskmaster on your back harping about deadlines — the stuff of cubicle daydreams.

Breakdowns

Let me run down some of the items I'll be going over in this book.

Land. *Mother Earth News* likes to depict the woodsy homestead in the tall pines by a gurgling brook. Fact is, even the rawest land these days is pricey if it comes with water and timber. The only really cheap land left in the States is worthless land. That means desert land. Bone-dry land.

Summer. Ouch. Typically, 110-120 degrees. When June rolls around, I decamp like the wuss I am and go tenting in the mountains or sailing on San Francisco Bay. Most of the other homesteaders — hardier, and with more personal property to protect — ride it out. The Hobo, in an effort to keep cool, has buried his trailer in a deep pit. (He has a periscope he uses to watch the critters nosh at a feeding trough.) Most everybody else in summer uses various versions of

homemade 12-volt swamp coolers. I tried one too, and also experimented with the heat chimney and the wind scoop.

Housing. I built a simple cottage of sand bags and scrap lumber facing a courtyard patio covered with a shade-giving *ramada.* A south-facing solarium heats the sleeping room on cool days. I spent about $300, mostly for salvaged lumber and garage sale stuff, and for renting a truck to haul the stuff to the site. I had to go bottom dollar because I was broke after getting broomed from my last job. It took me a week or so of puttering to build the sleeping hogan, and then I tacked on the rest, at a leisurely pace, over the next month. I did the work myself with ordinary hand tools. Most of the measuring was by eyeball. And I didn't knock myself out.

Utilities. The Smoke Tree Valley, of course, is off the grid. No power poles. I had to form my own private utility. On the floorboard of my car, I keep a couple of deep cycle marine batteries that I charge off the alternator while I'm driving around. At home, I plug my car into the hogan, and have plenty of juice to run lights, TV, fans, fountains, air filter, and a computer. I have a small solar panel to run the kitchen light, but solar is too damned complicated and expensive. It takes an electrical engineer to get it working right. Windmills have the same problems, and they're also too delicate and noisy. I figure I'm gonna drive the car anyway. Might as well use it to pump up a couple of extra batteries.

Heat comes from a catalytic propane heater. The brand name is "Mr. Heater," and everybody out here uses 'em. The cost of utilities is a hell of a lot less than my former utility bill — the price of a couple of Kmart batteries and a tank of propane. Refrigeration? Mostly I let the supermarket handle it, although I do have an evaporative cool box good enough to keep beer at pub temperature. Shower? A homemade deal out of a big hand-pumped garden sprayer. I also have a bathtub I got from a salvage yard, but it uses too much water to be practical.

The Life. Mostly one of leisure. After breakfast, I usually stroll for a few hours in the cool of the morn. I'm an ambler and a rambler, not a hiker. I like the desert, and I like to poke around in the dozens of seldom-visited canyons in the mountains near my place. Some regard the surroundings as kind of dun and sere, but I've come to enjoy the vista. When I return after a morning's exploration, I lie on a cot in the shade of the courtyard *ramada* and read novels for while. After lunch, a siesta. In the afternoon, I take care of any chores, putter around aimlessly, read some more, or go visiting — maybe motor up the hill to listen to a jeremiad from the Demented Vet. After dinner, a cocktail while the lurid, gaudy sunset flames in the Western sky. Then I watch one of the vintage videos I rent in town (five for five bucks). I enjoy this kind of languid repose for a couple of weeks. When I get restless, I take a trip someplace, using all the dough I save by not paying rent.

Conversations. One of my most interesting neighbors is the person I've taken to calling The Demented Vet. Throughout this book, there are six separate sidebars of my conversations, one-sided though they may be, with the Demented Vet. To give you an idea of what he's like, imagine this view with each Conversation:

The Demented Vet is at home, as usual, at his remote desert seat atop a bleak stone hill. He's reclining on a lounge chair under a flapping awning, a pump Thermos of coffee and a cigarette roller on a table at his elbow. Binoculars hang from the chair back. Propped against his trailer, within easy reach, is an AK-47, the weapon of choice out here. The Demented Vet is very security conscious. I am not allowed, on pain of execution, to describe any of his arrangements or preparations.

On the other hand, I wouldn't call him tight-lipped. From the moment of one's arrival until the mentally exhausted visitor warily begins edging toward his car, the Demented Vet spiels like the Ancient Mariner to the wedding guest. At least he has the same dogged verbosity if not always the Mariner's mesmerizing magnetism. Like a marooned Crusoe sequestered on an atoll for too many empty years, the Demented Vet leaps at the rare opportunity to uncork the vapors of his lonely broodings. There's no place like the desert for honing political theories.

Well, now for a closer look.

Chapter Two
Overview

"You idiot!" says my sister, "Why would you want to go rusticate in the faraway and inconvenient *Gobi Desert* in a *primitive hut* made out of sandbags? You're not a Navajo. Is a job really so awful? Are you allergic to a paycheck? Isn't this really a kind of *avoidance of responsibility?"*

Hmm. Well, in my own case, over the space of a year, I got fired from two corporate jobs, both times for bad attitude and insubordination. It seemed like either some trend was shaping or psychologically I had taken a self-destructive stance (even though the last time my measly insubordination didn't amount to much). The *jefes* had put up a pegboard, and wanted us to show, by peg placement, whether we were in or out and when we'd be back. I set my peg permanently at *out* and back at *five*. If they saw me sitting at my desk, I was *in*, otherwise look at your watch.

Anyway, I'd been fired from other jobs over the years, but never two in a row. Usually my M.O. is to quit in a huff over some violated principle or perceived wrong before they *can* fire me. I'll say this — no matter how many times you get sacked, it still kind of stings. It's hard not to take it personally. The self-esteem takes a body slam, never mind all your righteous contempt for the suit delivering the pink slip.

This latest time, for some reason, I felt loathe to start looking for another job. Other times, after getting frog-walked out of an office, I'd eventually start fishing around. But now I'm getting older, the bosses younger. I really didn't feel like taking orders from a recent high school graduate or some other junior widget. If I had a modest competence I could retire to a studio apartment in a geezer ghetto. Too bad I haven't been provident, and I never worked anyplace long enough to get vested in a pension. And my 401(k) doesn't have much K in it.

Anyway, like a lot of other profligate Boomers, I'm looking at the dreary prospect of living on Social Security, if it turns out there is any. Fine. Not to be the beaming scion of Pollyanna, but I think I could get along okay on the pittance I'm due from Social Security — that is, if, I don't have to pay the landlord a shit load of rent or the cold-hearted banker a mortgage payment. I think I can get by on Social Security because I'm frugal. I don't need a lot of dough. I like to travel, but it can be last class budget and on foot, and I don't mind carrying a tent. These days, it's the *rent* that's the ball buster. It can soak up half the pay envelope.

After I got canned, I started thinking, all I *really need* is some modest biding place to hang the lid when I'm not on the road. Doesn't have to be much. It just has to be rent-free, and sans mortgage. Now as it happened I already owned these ten worthless acres in Bumfuck out at the end of a washboard road in the dusty desert. So I got to thinking... *could I live out there?* Could I build

some kind of half-ass house out there? That'd solve the rent question. Maybe I could be a heroic Daniel Boone, desert division. Or a cranky hermit. Or a gibbering loon polishing his political theories like Teddy the K. Anyway, that kind of speculation was the genesis of the Dirt-Cheap Homestead.

The Research

The author confesses the truth. He is not of pioneer stuff.

Trouble is, I knew nothing. I had no skills. I'm not handy. I'd never taken a shop class. I'd never been able to comprehend the exploded view in the auto shop manual. I had no natural penchant or predilection for tool-handling and construction.

Despite all that, I did yearn to breathe free (or at least have a rent-free abode). So, with reckless disregard, I didn't let my ignorance and clumsiness hold me back. I needed habitation, shelter. Immediately. Because I had no place to crash, and I certainly didn't want another idiot job. I had to rise above my limitations.

In a doubtful case like this, I usually would go to the library and browse the shelves to give me the sensation of doing something and maybe I'd get an idea. I'd look at books about owner-built homes in all kinds and styles of alternative construction from sheds, barns, post and beam, straw bale, adobe, underground, geodesic, to rammed earth. I'd flip the pages, looking for ideas that might help me slap together something half-ass that's habitable and cheap on my little square of sunny heath in the desert.

Mostly there was no help for me. The plans were too complicated and ambitious for a dunce. Or they were too expensive for a perishingly thin budget of maybe two or three Benjamins. Or they might be too labor intensive and time-consuming for one guy who doesn't even have a truck and had to do everything himself. I wanted something simple and quick and cheap. I looked at a book about yurts and tipis. But no, even these super tents were too tough to make, and I'd have to cut and sew, which was out of the question. My mind kept reverting to sandbags.

One time while working for a newspaper, I wrote a story about this Persian architect, Nader Khalili of the Cal-Earth Institute in Hesperia, who built houses out of sandbags. As a young man, traveling around his native Iran on a motorcycle, Khalili noted the practicality of earth houses in desert climates. Well-insulated, rugged, and the material right under your nose, free for the taking. The drawback was that sun-baked, un-reinforced mud brick didn't hold up too well in that country's frequent earthquakes. Every few years, a temblor in Iran sends mud walls tumbling, crushing to death thousands of villagers. His central insight: the buildings needed to be domes made of sandbags tied together with barbed wire instead of mud brick. He bruited the idea around in the States, and pretty soon had a couple of contracts: one with NASA to develop a design for sandbag houses on the moon (*that'll be the day*), and a contract with a United Nations agency to create plans for a simple hut that could be built by refugees.

The UN result launched him on a career as an innovator in alternative housing. His design for the UN was a sandbag dome about fourteen feet in diameter meant to be built in a few days by a famished woman and a couple of kids. The sandbags came with instructions (in the form of drawings), and the whole package was airdropped by relief agencies. According to the plan, the refugees filled the bags using tin cans at the exact place where the bag belonged in the wall. "If they have to lift the bag, they're doing it wrong." Khalili says.

He picked Hesperia in the southern California desert as the site of his institute because of the extreme conditions — blistering in summer, arctic in winter, and lots of earthquakes. On a patch of desert property outside of town, he set up his school and started building sandbag houses.

In a word, Khalili's basic sandbag dome was made either from regular sandbags or from long plastic tubes gradually filled with damp earth and tamped down as the tube was coiled in circles. Instead of mortar, strands of four-point barbed wire were laid between the courses. The inside was stuccoed with a mix of earth, cement, and straw, then painted with milk and linseed oil.

Sometimes the outside skin got covered with what Khalili calls "rep-tile" — cement-stabilized mud balls. Khalili said the mud ball tiles were good insulation and temper the destructive lash of the desert turd-floater. The domes could be built for about $250 using the tubular fiber bags that come in rolls.

"Nature likes the conical form," Khalili said, according to my newspaper report. "It's the result of gravity and friction. You notice that mountains and hills aren't shaped like boxes."

The sandbag dome supposedly stood up to earthquake, flood and fire, and it's comparatively non-toxic, without the noxious exhalations of plywood or Styrofoam insulation.

The city of Hesperia was not amused. The building inspectors couldn't find anything about sandbag houses in the Uniform Building Code. And being un-reinforced with rebar, they certainly did not meet earthquake standards. Khalili invited the city bureaucrats to participate in a little test. He invited them to bring out a couple of city cement trucks, attach steel cables to the domes, and see if the trucks could pull them over. As you guessed, the trucks failed. The arch and the dome, as the ancient Romans figured out, are mighty, if done right.

Khalili also experimented with ceramic dome houses that are fired from the inside like a clay pot, and then a sandbag tract house. Eventually, the city bureaucrats came around, and wound up giving him the contract to build the city's natural history museum out of sandbags.

While doing the story, I went to a couple of classes at the school. The students came from different walks of life. Some were middle-aged former flower children, still interested in hippie lifestyles. Some were Y2K survivalists from Idaho mainly impressed with the ability of a sandbag house to sop up heavy rounds. I met a group of Aborigines from the bleak Pilbara region of Australia, who wanted to escape the suffocating metal prefabs provided by the government and return to some form of earth building as practiced by their ancestors. Although the work involved a lot of dirt moving, I noticed the teams of students put up sandbag walls pretty fast.

Still, when it came time to think about building my own hogan, I had to pass on the dome. Maybe a famished refugee mom in Chad could put one of these babies together, but I didn't think I could. For a dome to work, measurements are needed, even if they come from a string on a pole. The strength of a dome depends on the bags being wedged together by compression. I didn't trust myself to get it right.

But I liked the sandbag idea. Fill one (which pretty much anybody can do), and you have a building block. I also borrowed the idea of the wind scoop from Khalili's model tract house.

Finally, when I started the little sleeping hogan that was to be the anchor of my homestead, I used sandbags. I also improvised from the scrap and salvage I'd managed to assemble on the property, using a bunch of different inchoate ideas culled from books and from observing what other homesteaders had done.

Building Ideas

I also borrowed a couple of ideas I'd come across over the years that I figured wouldn't be too hard to incorporate into the rancho. Some of them worked, but most of them didn't.

Walls. Cardboard walls for the compound surrounding the hogan were an alternative to the too-expensive plywood panel that I couldn't afford. The idea suggested by Hippie Jim was unlike plywood, and cardboard was ridiculously cheap. At a building supply in the desert town of Blythe, California, 100-pound bales of recycled cardboard went for $.75 cents each. I tried some experiments. Using the same jig, I used to make *crapboard* (which I'll explain later). I laid out squares of cardboard and pasted them up in layers. Hippie Jim used flour glue. I tried that, and it worked okay, and has the advantage of being butt simple. But reference books at the library gave recipes for other kinds of glues the homesteader could mix in a bucket. In my case, I found some jugs of marked-down cheap white glue for a few bucks at a discount store. Hippie Jim painted his cardboard wall with wax from melted candles he'd get at the thrift store. I tried a panel as an experiment, and that worked pretty well. My own idea at the Rancho: I tried soaking the cardboard panels in a solution of soupy cement. The paper disintegrated into mush. On those times I was glad I worked alone.

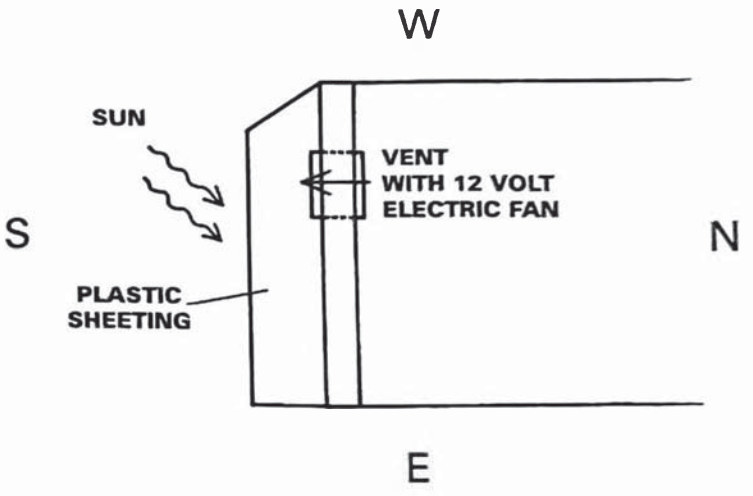
Heating & Cooling. For heat, I tried something like a Trombe wall. It was the concept that counted, not the name (which is for some Frenchman), or the execution, which in my case had been kind of slap-dash. This heated the interior of a dwelling in winter using sunshine. Basically, the idea was to add a shallow solarium on the south-facing side of the building. It could be glazed with salvaged window panes. If the builder wasn't thinking of the ages, he could use plastic sheeting that would probably last a couple of seasons, except maybe not in the desert if the wind got to it.

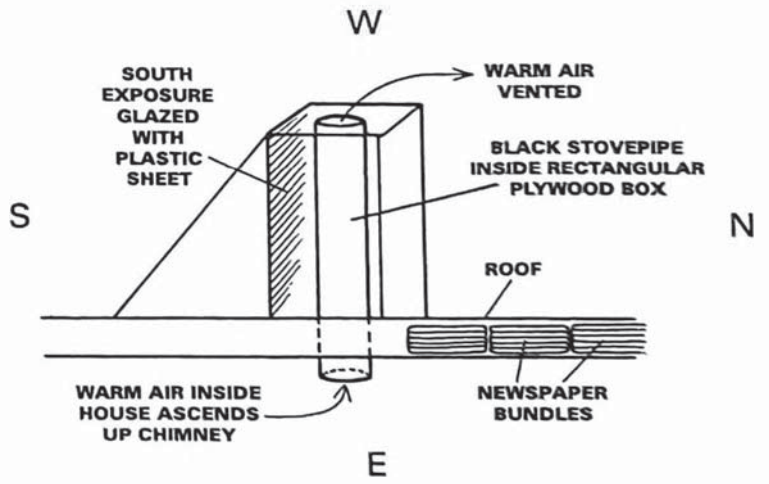
Anyway, the sun warmed up the air inside the glass and wafted the air into the house, or 12-volt fans could circulate the warm air. Dozens of books detailed versions of this simple principle, but all these designs were too complicated and expensive for the dirt cheap homestead. I concentrated on the principle — a glazed greenhouse on the south size that heats up air that then seeps into the house. That was what I built, glazed with plastic sheeting. Last summer, the wind tore the sheeting to ribbons, but now I've got a line on getting a bunch of salvaged windows for free from a Blythe planning commissioner.

Cooling was another one I mulled for awhile — an underground pipe to draw in cool air in summer. The *energetic* builder could dig a trench leading into the living quarters. An eight-inch diameter plastic sewer pipe (too expensive to buy, so it had to be salvaged) went into the trench and was covered with rocks and dirt. The end that comes up outside was screened to keep out insects and rodents. The end coming up inside the hogan had a small 12-volt fan attached to pull out the air. The principle: Outside air cools as it transits the pipe underground and emerges in the dwelling place. Since the operative word was *energetic* and I'm not, it didn't happen.

The solar chimney was an old idea that the certified world traveler sees on mud houses in medieval villas in basket case countries, but I updated it a little for Western use. A tall chimney, painted black, stuck up from the roof of the house, held securely in place by guy wires. The sun heated the chimney and caused the air inside to rise, thus drawing the warm air out of the house. In the western version, the black chimney was encased in glazing to increase the effect. Usually, the glazing was only on the south and east side in the northern hemisphere. Eventually, I tried a

solar chimney on my hogan and it kinda worked, but the same fierce windstorm that shredded the solarium also kayoed the heat chimney.





Tools. As for tools, I decided I'd have to pretty much go with what I had, which was the usual assortment of basic stuff, hammer, saw and so on. I also had a 20-year-old 200-watt Honda generator left over from my last building project, the Amenity-Less Horror, my cabin up in Lassen County. But I never used the generator. Instead, I opted for a couple of battery-powered tools, a screwdriver, and a small circular-saw. Those were the tools I wound up buying for a total outlay of $60. The saw I bought because it's too hard to saw plywood by hand, the screwdriver, because

my arm got sore after awhile from pounding nails (even the little six-penny ones). The Hobo already had told me it's a lot easier to use a power screwdriver and wallboard screws.

I had a few items left from stripping my sailboat before I sold it (following my departure from steady work). My sister had given me a power drill for one of my birthdays, but a full charge only gave me a couple of holes. I recharged the tubular batteries for the screwdriver and circular saw using an inverter and the two marine batteries in my car.

Basic tools used: hammer, saw, crowbar, and gloves. Later on, I added to the arsenal a power screwdriver and a small 12-volt circular-saw.

I left the library with a full noggin of schemes. But now, the time had come to put these notions into play, or I'd be sleeping on the sidewalk.

Salvage and The Hobo

Wallet like a pancake. Ditto bank account. Pretty much down to bare metal seeds and stems. So with the help of the Hobo, I collect some salvage and scrap and haul a truckload of this stuff out to the desert scatter.

I had a starting construction budget of about $300 cash. The only flex was in one still-limber credit card that hadn't quite been maxed. Obviously, I wouldn't be shopping for materials at the building supply. Everything would have to be salvage... or scrounged.

Nowadays when I ride the Californian, the Amtrak train that runs through the Central Valley between Bakersfield and Oakland, I covet the junk I see from the window of the dining car. The tracks, like train tracks everywhere, parallel countless unkempt backyards and lots littered with the detritus of untidy lives. On the outskirts of burgs like Fresno and Stockton stretch miles of corporation yards, bursting like an abscess with lots of material I certainly could use out on the Rancho: stacks of wooden pallets; rusting metal beams; gutted trailers; splintered, graying lumber; scraps of plywood; and jumbles of broken concrete and rebar. I could put that stuff to use out at the homestead. Trouble is, of course, the Rancho lies in the remote vastness of the Colorado Desert, and this cornucopia of junk, much of which probably I could snag for a song, incon-

veniently reposes here, five hundred miles away. Farther than the wail of a train whistle on a still night.

That's the only drawback to using salvage. Most of it is where the people are, and the cheap desert homestead is gonna be where people aren't. Thus, the major cost of a salvage operation — and it's sometimes a considerable cost — is in moving the pretty much worthless junk items from the urban venue to the faraway homestead. Particularly in my case, the cost is high since I don't own a truck. My only transport is a three-cylinder Geo Metro, which means that when I have to move heavy items, such as salvaged lumber, concrete, and pallets, I have to hire a lift. My biggest single expense in building the dirt cheap homestead — $139 — covered the rental of a U-Haul truck.

My homestead is about 45 miles from Blythe, California, a town located on the Colorado River across from Ehrenburg, Arizona. Blythe's population is 12,000 unincarcerated, a distinction since two state prisons lie within the gerrymandered city limits. Happily, that's a large enough population to generate the waste and residue that the salvager needs to work with. I learned all of this about salvaging from the Hobo.

The Hobo is another settler out in the Smoke Tree Valley, residing on a homestead located six or seven miles north of mine. I think it's interesting that he spent about a year digging a big hole to bury his trailer. Makes sense, I guess, estivation. All the animals in the desert burrow below ground to escape the heat. But the Hobo has put a periscope in his buried trailer so he can watch the animals that snoop around his compound at night. He puts out kibble for the coyotes. He's sitting down there in his trailer like Captain Nemo...

Anyway, the Hobo knew where to score the salvage. He agreed to help round up and load the junk I'd need for my homestead in exchange for a little space on the truck for water tanks and dog food for the wildlife.

Big adventure, huh? Gathering up all the items necessary for building a desert hogan. I hoped this would mean, finally, cutting the cord with the landlord and the utility company. I cast a hopeful eye to shrugging off the constraints of the nine-to-five-Monday-through-Friday wage-earning grind, and taking command of my own life again. It'd be just another day in Samland for the other mopes, but for me, it would be umbilical separation day, when I'd grab the wheel away from the officious chauffeur Fate had assigned and pull off onto an interesting side road.

The Hobo had pulled off on a side road a long time ago. In his mid-forties now, he once had a footloose career of budget wandering all over the globe before he bought his ten acres out in the Smoke Tree Valley. As a certified bargain class world traveler the Hobo had struck Blythe on one of his cross-country sojourns, and saw the potential right off the bat. Hemmed all around by waterless, worthless dirt, Blythe anchors down plenty of nothing except stark, scrubby, sun-smitten desert for a hundred miles in any direction. I had stumbled into possession of my baronial estate by sheer chance, but the Hobo picked the Smoke Tree.

I'd first spied the Hobo on a Blythe side street sitting on a curb next to his car. The ancient Volks bug had a full-sized sofa strapped to a home-made carrying box carved into the backseat. He called his car the Clampett-mobile, after the sorry hearse-colored vehicle in the *Beverly Hillbillies*. I guess that car had a sofa attached. In my position then as editor of the local astonisher, I was always on the lookout for feature filler. At first glance, the Hobo seemed the kind of eccentric feature a newspaper always could use. He wore voluminous clown trousers with one suspender, a plaid shirt buttoned all the way to the top, and ten-pound ankle weights. (He once told me that Kmart offers the best ankle weights, *and he'd shopped the world.*) Chatting, we soon figured out we owned land in the same valley. A few months later, after I got canned and made my big decision to homestead, he showed me how to get started in the racket.

Finding the Pieces. Our first stop was Wood Charlie's, across the river in Ehrenburg. Wood Charlie dealt exclusively in salvaged lumber, working out of a dusty lot at the far end of the main drag, and using his billfold for his office. His main stock was six-foot cedar boards, either 1" by 8" or 1" by 6" that come from shipping crates. The boards were splintery and warped but strong as iron. Anyway, for about a hundred bucks, I got all the lumber I needed — not only 60 cedar boards (which I wound up using in place of studs) but also a cord or so of 8' by 16" plywood remnants, that Charlie wanted to get rid of (perfect stuff for sheathing).

Back on the California side, we headed for the Oasis Water Company to pick up used 100-gallon water tanks for ten bucks each. We got seven: four for me, and three for the Hobo. Stopping at the city park where travelers can draw water for free, we used a garden hose to fill six of the tanks. This city park in Blythe, by the way, was the main source of potable water for the homesteaders, ever since the town-dwelling owner of the only more or less sweet well out in the Smoke Tree put a lock on the pump. J.R., another of the settlers, does have the keys to another well, but the water is too salty to drink and too sulfurous to bathe in, although it's okay for washing dishes and for watering the cactus.

Six-hundred gallons of water flattened the springs on the U-Haul a bit, but we continued on to Ace Hardware to pick up pallets. This was one of the great deals for the dirt cheap homesteader because the pallets are free, *gratis*, help yourself. These pallets had pretty much had it, as far as the drayage industry was concerned, being torn up and broken. But it was free wood, so we piled pallets to the ceiling.

At Ace, we also picked up 100-pound bales of used, flattened out cardboard at 75¢ a bale. We also got a half a dozen or so 90-pound bags of cement and concrete. The cement's about $5 a bag, the concrete $2.50 a bag for post hole filling

My tab so far was $100 for the wood, $40 for the tanks, $20 for cement and concrete, and a couple of bucks for cardboard. The truck, like I said, was gonna cost $139 to rent plus $40 to refill the gas tank. Bad luck made another expense. As I was leaving the U-Haul yard, I accidentally rammed the Cyclone fence, not being used to the wide turns required by a big truck. The fence wasn't hurt too much, but apparently I also kayoed the night bell meant for the use of propane customers. The owner said, "Gee, I'll need an electrician to fix this." This was about 30 seconds after I had declined the insurance, which I always figured was a rip-off. Anyway, I settled with the owner on the spot for cash. So I added another $100 to the tab, which meant I had to put the Ace Hardware stuff on the credit card.

There was still a little room left on the truck, so we stopped by the back of the *Palo Verde Valley Times*, my former employer, to pick up a couple hundred bundles of old newspapers out of the dumpster. I used the bundles of newspaper for wall and roof insulation, after I wrapped the bales in plastic bags (Yeah, you're right, that isn't precisely up to code...). And then we made the last stop in town, Smart and Final, where the Hobo picked up two 100-pound sacks of dog food. The Hobo didn't have a dog. The kibble was strictly to attract coyotes and other critters for his nightly viewing pleasure.

The other main ingredient for the dirt cheap homestead I had already purchased: 300 sandbags, bought over the Internet from e-Sandbag for $30.

Junk and the Roads. Before I finish telling about my move out to the desert, you need a better sense of the terrain and my neighbors. I say that as one of them has been a great source for salvage. Cherokee's junk ranch, at the north end of the valley, is a sprawling 40 acres of old cars, trailers, boats, and all manner of discarded flotsam that Cherokee feels still might have some

worth in the eyes of his homesteading neighbors. The ranch does have the inarguable attraction of offering a wide range of salvaged junk at comfortable prices in a convenient location.

When Cherokee resides at the ranch, he sleeps in the open air atop a pile of eight mattresses. It's not because he's as sensitive as the famous princess from the story. It's because he wants to stay out of the reach of the coon-tailed rattlers; the snakes enjoy the shade and cover provided by the many low-lying deposits of old boards and tin shed roofing, and they come slithering out in the evening to search for rodents. The Hobo says you kinda have to know what you're doing on the ranch, because Cherokee has salted some of the approaches to his valuable junk with tacks and barbed wire covered with a layer of dirt.

The couple of main well-traveled dirt roads out in the Smoke Tree are pretty good. I go over them in my low-slung Geo Platelet, but I've gotten stuck. I now slow up to ten mph over the long stretches of washboard, and then bear down on the gas pedal through the gravel washes. The main dirt road, Milpitas Wash Road, is sort of maintained by the county, since it curls around toward the prisons and finally debouches near Interstate 10. But I've been stuck in the washes a couple of times.

Most of the homesteaders get to their properties over a private road that's maintained by J.R., who owns a grader. J.R. presents as gruff and prickly, and claims he grades the road strictly for his own benefit, but everybody else thinks he does it out of community spirit. There is other evidence of this, since he's always willing to help out a traveler in a jam.

The road out to the Rancho, however, is called Midway Road, and it's partially maintained, sort of, by the Marine Corps. The road runs along the Chocolate Mountain Naval Gunnery Range, and military trucks use it to haul out shredded targets that have been bombed and strafed for practice. The road's sandy and soft in the low areas and washes, and motorists who make the mistake (as I have) of pulling over a minute to get their bearings might find it takes awhile to get moving again. After it passes the turnoff into the military reservation, the road becomes impassable to all but super-robust vehicles such as J.R.'s six-wheel-drive water tanker truck.

Getting to the Rancho

The original plan had been to stop by Cherokee's Junk Ranch out in the valley to pick up 2" by 4"s and tin roofing. Cherokee, an octogenarian auto mechanic who dubs himself "The Honest Engine," turned out to be on his latest honeymoon, having just married a woman he met in the tiny ville of Palo Verde, where he keeps a trailer.

The Hobo and I were pretty confident the heavily loaded U-Haul could handle this road as far as the turnoff to the Rancho. But Rancho Costa Nada sat about a half mile across open desert. When my friends Gordon and Tule and I first turned up with the GPS looking for the coordinates, there was nothing — nothing, except an old sand-choked path nearby wandering out to a long-abandoned homestead from the Fifties. The desert around the Rancho was (and still is) covered with what's called "varnish," a shiny thick crust of sand and pebbles. Under the varnish was powdery talc-like sand.

Happily, I guess, we got the U-Haul all the way out to the Rancho proper before it became hopelessly stuck, the rear wheels buried to the hubs. The Hobo said it was because I was trying to back up. I'd wanted to back in behind the shade shack to unload the water tanks. The Hobo said, "It's never a good idea to back up on varnish; it's smarter to keep going forward even if it means making large loops." To me, that information seemed to arrive like a tardy scholar, but

hey. In any case... now that we were stuck (a very common occurrence in the valley), we had to lighten the load.

We put the empty water tank on the ground and began siphoning through a garden hose. When a tank went dry, we lifted it out of the truck and drained the next one into it. With the truck empty, we began the usual drill: dig out the wheels, line the holes with rock, and push in boards and brush under the tires. Hours went by, with no luck. The futilely spinning wheels were in too deep, the sand too soft. The truck (even empty) was too heavy, blah blah. Finally, the Hobo says, "We need to get J.R. J.R. has that big six-wheel-drive tanker truck that could pull us out. "

Visiting J.R. For the first couple of years that I owned the Rancho, I'd come out on weekends from time to time with people from the *Orange County Register*, but we didn't really know that anybody lived out here. We'd see trucks on the road sometimes. It wasn't until the Hobo introduced me around that I realized how many neighbors I had — five or six.

J.R.'s place was about four miles away. The Hobo took a compass bearing on where he thought it was, and we started off on foot. I took a gallon jug of water. In a little while the Hobo says, "We're gonna pass right by Indian Phil's old place."

Felipe the Indian had got in trouble with the county because he was using his homestead as a depository for old tires. People would pay him to make their old tires disappear from a corporation yard. He figured it was the best and highest commercial use of his property. The county called it a nuisance and issued a warning. Finally the county came out with an abatement order.

In the ensuing gunfight, Phil shot the finger off the resident deputy, and then eluded a considerable manhunt that included helicopters. Eventually, the law caught up with him in North Dakota, where he was living on a reservation. The Hobo said that after the gunfight the enraged lawmen burned Phil's trailer. Now there was nothing left of the trailer except a charred frame.

The detour to look at Indian Phil's had put us a little off course, and we were now on the backside of J.R.'s compound. The Hobo thought we ought to keep our voices low, work around to the front, and come in on the road, whistling a tune. J.R. and his wife had a menagerie of animals that included a dozen or so not-that-friendly pooches spotted around the compound and tethered on break-away leashes. J.R.'d told me before I was welcome to visit, provided I came in on the road.

Before we got to J.R.'s driveway, we came to a break in the scrub where a fairway opened up to the trailers. The Hobo turned in. I did not, and in another second the inevitable gunshot went singing over the Hobo's head. I knew it was just a warning shot, and not aimed at me, since I didn't hear any crackling. But I prudently hit the dirt anyway. The Hobo was yelling appropriate words, and now J.R. appeared carrying an AK-47. After a few choice remarks about morons who don't heed his instructions, he invited us in for coffee. He said we looked like Mexicans, since I was carrying the gallon water jug, which is pretty much standard for the illegals who cross this patch on their way to I-10. "Nothing against 'em," J.R. says, "but they wander into the compound and set off the dogs."

Now we were alright. After berating us for awhile over coffee, J.R. started the rescue operation. With the help of his six-wheel-drive tanker truck and a hank of chain, the U-Haul popped out of the sand in a wink. Not wanting to stop the truck on varnish again, we headed straight back to town to return the truck without further misadventures.

When I went back to the Rancho alone in my Geo, I'd start on the hogan.

Conversations with the Demented Vet, I

"You again? I see that piece-of-shit red Geo coming and I say to myself, please, don't turn up my road. I don't believe in telepathy or prayer, but I try it anyway, in your case. Did you read that in the paper about this high school kid who got expelled for saying 'under Mammon' during the pledge? 'One nation under Mammon, indivisible...' Wiseass little punk but pretty damn accurate in my opinion. Wahabbi John and some brown-nosed subsidy-sucking Baptist clone of a principal expelled him for telling the truth about this country. That's the kind of tight-assed unsmiling American Gothic can't-take-a-fucking-joke Baptist government we've got today. Did you see that on TV when all those hypocritical Philistine U.S. Senators got up together for the under God pledge? Did you puke? You can't please God and Mammon, and you can't get into the U.S. Senate without having made that *decision a long time ago. Flannel-mouthed sanctimonious butt-in-the-air hypocrites who grab their ankles for every corporate lobbyist who walks down the corridor.* Instinctive. Pavlovian.

"That kid Lindh who took up with the Taliban? You think he'll ever be sharing a cell with a real traitor like Kenny Boy Lay? The kid didn't do anything except fall for a religious line of crap. Do we put brainwashed broccoli-eating Moonies in prison? But those felonious back-stabbing Benedict Arnold CEOs who trashed their stockholders and ripped off the help? Enron's pension plan? Wal-Mart greeter. I say, the shortest way with the traitors, Phil. That's what I say. But instead they're holed up in their gated communities counting their millions. Ha! *I know. I'm in a gated community myself, if you count the hounds and the trip wire. But I didn't get here by selling my country down the river and fleecing the rubes who took my word for something. Okay. I know about the stockholders. The greedy bastards deserved it. Just like the greedy bastards who went down with the savings and loan. But the Enron stiffs didn't have a choice on the 401(k), Phil. They weren't even allowed to collect a whopping one point five in the money market. They weren't allowed to buy T-bills to finance the deficit being racked up by Rummy and Dummy and Dicky and Conda-leezy. Hey, nobody more willing than me to mess up the ragheads. But not with this bunch. Not with Howdy Doody as CINC.*

"There's POTUS teeing off on the back nine when the bird colonel trots up with the football. Sir, Dicky Boy wants you to mash the button. 'This one here? There. Let freedom ring. Now watch this drive.' *A commander in chief with the resting heart rate of a hibernating toad.*

Oh I know what you're saying, you damned liberal. None of those sniveling sumbitch Enron drones ever whined about accounting fraud when Enron and WorldCom went to the moon. But don't get me started on the deficit, Phil. Traitors, Phil.

"Do you think your kid will ever see a dime of Social Security? Figure it out. Count on your fingers. It doesn't take Howdy Doody with his Harvard MBA. Right now there's nothing in the lockbox but IOUs. All the Social Security surplus gets spent. At least that child-molesting pervert Clinton — may he spend his flaming eternity in Hell getting red-hot BJs from poxy lava-mouthed Calcutta hookers — at least Clinton tried to pay down the debt. This bunch! Spend, spend, spend, money they don't got, and can only get by squeezing the bejeesus out of the cajones *of the mouth-breathing middle class. Nobody wants twelve divisions more than me, Phil. Nobody wants a 400-*

ship Navy more than me. Nobody wants to smash Iraq, Iran, Zimbabwe, France and the Netherlands more than me. But where's the dough? It's been blown on welfare for the plutocrats.

"Oh, I know what you're gonna say, you damned liberal. The first duty of any government is to protect itself and the ruling elite. But they don't even leave a moldy crust and some gristle for the kids in the spastic school. This level of thievery is a finger in their own eye, Phil. The little chickens are feeling for their feathers and not finding any. Plucked and fucked. Even the docile narcotized tube-fed suburban zombie in his Barcolounger may wise up one of these days. And it's right in front of their noses. See this stack of newspapers? It's all there. *But they're snoozin' in front of the tube. Nap time in America. They won't snap to until they're wearing a barrel at the soup kitchen. Your average American sapsucker is clueless.*

"That was funny what you said the other day, Phil, about how during the Persian Gulf War you flew the Iraq flag in front of your house. And the next morning the whole neighborhood was on your doorstep. Thought it was a garage sale. I know it's a lie, I said it was funny. It just makes my point. Dummies. No idea what's bearing down on 'em. It's like Social Security keeps pushing the retirement age back. Pretty soon your son will have to be seventy-five before he can collect anything. If it's there. *I bet, I bet, Phil... Oh, I smell a default coming. They're gonna renege. Already they got an armed guard at the Social Security office in Blythe. What's that about? They're worried the saps may wake up. But maybe by that time we'll be hit by an asteroid. I hope I'm around for that.* Ka-boom. *Wipe the fucking smile off the faces of some of these people..."*

Chapter Three
Principles

I had principles in mind when I started on the desert homestead.

Cost

First, of course, it had to cost almost nothing. I hadn't had enough time to build up the kitty before this latest bunch got wise to me.

Of course, I could have lived like a Bedouin in a tent, but that would have been uncomfortable and inconvenient since boxcar winds whip through the Smoke Tree night and day. During several of the weekend visits by the gun club, all the tents were thrashed and flattened, pegs uprooted, and rip stop nylon flayed to ribbons. A dust devil skittered through the camp one afternoon and uprooted the shade awnings, wrung them out like laundry, and sent them swirling skyward like flapping kites. The homestead needed considerably more solidity than canvas, but without costing even a finger tip.

Design

Second principle: nothing fancy anywhere. Nothing in the design would be difficult for the average mope to comprehend. Only simple, understandable tools would be used, and nothing too dangerous. The only frightening tool I ever used in constructing the homestead was a tiny circular saw, and I never lifted it off the bench without first chanting this pithy and wise mantra: *"This fucking thing is dangerous. I could saw my fingers off. I'm untrained and I don't really know what I'm doing. So I'll never be in a hurry. I will think and have my gloves on before I pull the trigger."*

I had seen some fancy homemade dwellings: geodesic domes, filigreed and fillip-ed cob houses of fantastical and meandering complexity, octagonal tire houses. But my model had to be the humble time-tested box, not much in the way of a masonry foundation, and, of course, no interior plumbing or wiring.

Building Codes. Some may ask, "What about code? Will the dirt cheap homestead meet building code?" Sometimes you make me smile. I'm in denial on code. Besides, I don't believe for one second that a building inspector — a sleek, pampered bureaucrat working for the county — will put himself to the bother of driving 17 miles on back-bruising washboard to see what some disgruntled, perhaps demented and heavily armed hermit is doing out in the middle of God-forsaken nowhere. Particularly since nobody is complaining.

Usually, it's your next door Nosy Parker who rats out the unpermitted granny unit because he's worried that jackboot construction will cheapen his property's value. Out here, property value already is pretty much zero. Nobody has a permit to do anything, so nobody can afford to throw the first stone. Besides, the Hobo once told me that if a building is 10′ by 10′ or less, doesn't have a foundation, or if it's on skids or wheels, then it doesn't need a building permit. I proceed on this assumption, whether or not it's true, and will make no effort to inquire further.

Time & Money. Another good reason to keep it simple was time. I didn't want to put in years building a house. I was out of work with no place to go. I needed something basic right away — something I could slap together in a month, tops, but cute enough in design to moderate extreme temperatures, and tough enough to withstand the blustery desert gales.

And there is another consideration... if the homestead *is* trashed, either by vandals or by a particularly brisk boxcar, one shouldn't be out of pocket much. Whatever happens, I want no big investment in the thing. If built with pig-like cunning, a house can keep out nature, even the Big Bad Wolf. But nothing you can build will keep out the dedicated vandal. Out in the Smoke Tree, we get 'em from time to time — usually yahoos from the city on ATVs — but they're not a huge problem, because the Rancho is a long way from the pavement.

Sure, I hear a lot of alarmist stories from the other homesteaders, but so far at the Rancho, I have had only one incident, when an uninvited visitor bashed in the first outhouse; to underscore what kind of asshole he had, the perpetrator left an insolent turd (with the dirty paper) right in the center of the driveway.

Since I travel a lot, I'm not going to be around all year to protect the Rancho from such wandering cretins. I don't want to put a lot of effort or money into embellishments that may be defaced by every destructive transit cruising by on his quad.

Labor

Anyway, we've now come to principle three — no hard, repetitive, boring work. I don't have the grit for it. I'm indolent and easily distracted. Naturally, when building with dirt, this rule, from time to time, has to be abrogated. But as much as possible, I figured out ways to make dirt building a lot less arduous. From my slothful standpoint, the main drawback of any kind of dirt construction, be it rammed earth, adobe brick, sandbag, or cob, is that it's labor intensive, to put it mildly. I have no crew of giddy volunteers to pitch in. I'm working alone.

As you will see, the innovation that eased the workload was this: lack of determination. Whenever the work got boring or tiresome, I threw in the towel for awhile. I'd quit what I was doing, brew a cup of coffee, sit in the shade, and say to myself, "*There has to be an easier way to do this.*"

I also tried a bunch of experiments, including the notion of building an earth wall flat and then using my car and high lift jacks to tilt it up. That didn't work worth shit. I tried every means

known to soldier or Marine to fill a sandbag. At the suggestion of the Hobo, I finally gave up on the hammer, and used a power screwdriver instead. Anything to make it easer.

In Closing. In any case, these are my rock-bound principles: Find a stretch of the world filled with worthless desert. Pay a rock-bottom price for a piece of it. Then build a tight little nature-proof and comfortable homestead that's cheap, simple, and easy, in a couple of weeks or a month. Plant the proud banner of personal independence, and uncap a beer.

Chapter Four
Cheap Living

Over the years, I have met lots of folks and seen lots of things. I've always been intrigued by how and why people get along on nothing.

The Homeless

When I was a reporter at the *Orange County Register*, I did a story on the homeless mentally ill. I tagged along with some of them for a few days.

They're mostly harmless nuts. Sometimes one of 'em gets a wild hair and kills somebody or steals a baby, but usually they're invisible, from the old lady pushing a shopping cart piled high with trash bags filled with rags and handouts to the shabby codger on a bench ranting to himself. It's pretty much as you'd figure. They sleep under bridges, in the shrubbery along freeway medians, and in the weeds along the tracks. Churches and other do-gooders feed 'em in the park or at a soup kitchen. The county isn't completely indifferent. Social workers keep tabs, and hand out socks and soap. It's not enough, but it's not cold Russian indifference.

But I also noted plenty of people scamming the soup kitchen and the other handouts. These weren't nuts, or winos, or derelicts. They were young, physically fit, mentally competent budget travelers getting the free feed and using the good offices of the do-gooders to stretch the travel kitty.

When I worked for the mosquito abatement district, I'd fog the creek beds. I'd come across homeless encampments. Sometimes I'd stumble onto clusters of winos scattered around supine in the grass sleeping it off. Here I'd come, mask and respirator, a sputtering machine on my back with a nozzle spewing fog. Despite the interruption to their snooze, they were glad to see me. "*Kill the blood-sucking little bastards.*"

Some of the more permanent encampments got pretty elaborate. The winos had dragged in all kinds of salvage to make their hooches more homey and comfortable. Where they got all this shit, I don't know, but I suppose they rifled the dumpsters, delivery handled by shopping cart. They had couches and chairs, awnings made out of old rugs, and tents made out of plastic sheeting. Some tents had walls made out of packing crates and wood floors. One guy had taken the trouble to build a rock walkway. When they sat around the campfire passing the grape, they probably felt right at home.

One time while in the newspaper game, I did a story on water squatters. These were rejects that lived in various crap boats along a tidal slough. They'd float into town on the tide to panhandle and stock up on booze. Then they would float out on the ebb to some mud flats where they'd tie up and party. Even these folks had thrown together a couple of shanties to make life more comfortable. Obviously it's a general human trait to make home improvements.

Picker Camp

The most elaborate example of this that I've seen was the hidden camp of some tomato pickers in San Diego County. At that time I was reporting for the *Los Angeles Times*, and I'd heard a rumor that Mexican pickers were being confined in slave-like conditions by a family of rich Japanese tomato growers. When a photog and I got there, we found that armed guards in jeeps patrolled the vast fields. We heard from a local woman that the labor camp was hidden on a hillside right in the middle of the tomatoes. The photographer and I hid in her barn next to the fence, and at gray light, we slipped past the sleepy guards and started on foot through the vines. Pretty soon, we could hear mariachi music, and then we could see little tendrils of smoke curling up from the trees. To our amazement, we found a well-established Mexican village of three or four hundred people. Everybody had a little hooch made out of plastic and rags, plus each had an adjoining kitchen. Everybody seemed to have a hammock, and many of the men that Sunday morning were still abed and idly plunking guitars. It turned out the village had elected a mayor and had its own police. The Japanese owners allowed catering trucks to drive onto their land so people could buy tortillas (at exorbitant rates). The owners also allowed prostitutes to come in on Saturday night. The ville seemed well-organized and happy, except I heard complaints about the primitive sanitation — not even outhouses — and the water. They were drinking straight from the irrigation pipes, and this was water laced with chemicals for the tomatoes.

I'll just mention, as an example of blowback, what happened after I wrote about the encampment. County officials huffed at a press conference, and said this shouldn't be in America. And then they felt enough had been done. Meanwhile, the Japanese owners brought in bulldozers. The camp inhabitants had to grab an armful of clothes and flee. They wound up living in another shanty encampment many miles away, and their lives were much more difficult, thanks to investigative journalism.

Why Live on the Cheap?

The author's self-absorbed viewpoint suddenly widens to include a broader swath of humanity.

I admit that the desert homestead leaped to mind as a solution to my own pressing need for a roof. But now I'm thinking, altruistically, the Dirt Cheap Desert Homestead concept may have more general appeal, certainly to those not yet fully incorporated into the Borg, such as synthetic knit pensioners, SSI cases, welfare moms, and sorry-ass winos. Kidding. But how about some of the nation's blighted youth? The applicability of budget digs to all the geezers pinching by on Social Security is obvious. But how about the kids, like for instance the no-talent young mopes who have dropped out of high school and have no marketable skills and very marginal prospects in a greedy, high-tech globalized economy?

Hey. Face it, kid. You're screwed. Because of the aging population in Samland, in a few years there'll only be two of you actual wage peons to pungle up the ready for every codger sucking down Social Security benefits. The burger flippers and the car polishers, the poor young mopes working for shit wages — all are going to have to carry on their backs the burgeoning population of venerable gummers. You can be damn sure that today's young Burger King or McDonald-ite will never collect a dime of Social Security himself. He's been tapped to spend his greasy life paying the tab for the rest of us already on the dole. Nor will Mr. Minimum ever be able to save the ready for a dream tract house in Smog Vista Estates forty miles downwind from Gotham. He's pretty much doomed to the one-bedroom stucco apartment.

So I don't know. Maybe the Dirt Cheap Homestead, or something like it... is a way to kick free of this baneful fate. I offer the idea.

The criminal element might also perk up. When I wrote about the Persian architect who pioneered sandbag houses, I wasn't too surprised to learn that the most enthusiastic audiences for his talks were in state prisons. The jailbird *knows* he'll never qualify for a mortgage. The only way he'll ever get a house (after the Big House) will be by building one himself. One of the homesteaders I know on the sun-scorched outskirts of Blythe is a low-profile ex-con now on the straight-and-narrow, and that's what he said. No *bank*, after what he'd done, was gonna loan him dough to buy a house. He bought worthless land for a few bucks and built his own place from scratch. Another advantage for him? Living way out in the desert, the con doesn't see much of his parole officer.

Conversations with the Demented Vet, II

"What is it, Phil? Did you come up here to stare at my refrigerator? Do you need to borrow a cup of sand for your house? I already got a child. Is that the latest Times? *Have you been reading about the Blythe school board? I would* never *send a child to a public school in this country. Evan? He's in Corcoran right now, but that's his temper. I wouldn't send Evan to public school because of the propaganda they call education in this country.*

"It teaches sapismo, *Phil. It teaches subservience. It teaches obedience to authority and to the status quo. You call it a curriculum? Most of the hour in any public school classroom is taken up with social engineering. Orders handed down from government to fine-tune the little saps to adjust to their place in the ranks. Here's how to brush your teeth. Here's how to comb the nits out of your hair. Here's how to get along with others. Here's how* not *to get a social disease on your pecker. It goes on and on. Spelling? Arithmetic? Who's got time? The teachers don't teach. They're untrained social workers and cops.*

"You know, Phil that a second grade teacher once drove all the way out here — out here! — *on these roads, to tell me Evan needed to improve his playground skills. Could I tell him not to hit his playmates with the bat? That's when I pulled him out of school. She's not being paid to be a social worker. She's supposed to teach the little bastards to read a book. The truant officer? Came out one time, heard the dogs, never came back. But these teachers, Phil, they spend most of their time either trying to maintain order, or trying to get drugged-out welfare moms to feed their brats breakfast.*

"Half the kids in Blythe get breakfast AND lunch from school. They show up for first period starving and with no shoes on. They come in comatose because they've been up all night watching movies and smoking weed with mom. And the school board wants the teacher to deal with this. And she has no power. She has no whip hand with the shitheel parents. She has no say with the administration. There's nothing she can do with the kids. What? Send 'em to the office? The office doesn't want 'em either.

"And now what does the school board propose to do? Teach the little saps to take tests. Not how to read, *not how to* spell. *Geography? The brats haven't a clue. Because the teachers haven't a clue. I asked Evan one time to point out Afghanistan on that globe over there. He pointed at Italy. I'll tell you, Phil, I directly straightened up his ear with the back of my hand.* Next time I ask you better be able to find Afghanistan. *And this was in 1996. I told him Afghanistan would be in the news one of these days and that he just might find his own boots in the mud over there. And I think he would have too if he hadn't killed that guy. Now it's all tests. If the little saps don't do good on the tests, the state takes over the district, and all the administrators are out on the street.*

"Yes, asshole, now that you mention it, I do see a conspiracy. The underlying message here is that it's everybody's job to appease authority. It's everybody's job to measure up to standards somebody else sets for us. Set your own standards, Phil. When Evan was up here, I'd tell him, 'After you finish working on the cars, you read *something.' I always carried a paperback in my back pocket no matter where I was in the world. I must have read a thousand shit kickers just standing in chow line. It paid off for Evan. He's read half the books in the Corcoran library already. If you have a library card, Phil, you have an education. Nobody* gave *Malcolm X an education. He* took *it. Out of the prison library, just like Evan is doing.*

"But those little oil paintings sitting at their desk in high school wanna be spoon-fed. They wanna be entertained. You've got to do what you can with the brats before puberty. Once the hormones kick in, it's too late. After sixth grade, you might as well give 'em three years off to socialize and go to hops. Well, whatever they call 'em now. Do you know the sheriff now has a full-time deputy at the high school? Has to. *Nine-tenths of the crime. Well, it's good. Put the little bastards in jail early. I think if Evan had had that opportunity, he would have better understood the consequences of killing people without permission."*

Chapter Five
Money & Jobs

Sa-diddy nigh unna jus' got paid. Fool a-bow m'munny do-oan tryta save...

So, anyway, I forestalled future testy employers by removing myself preemptively from the job market before management can nuke me again. Still, I'd have to consider the dab of money I'd need for homesteading. I knew I'd need a little dough to maintain a household.

Crime was out. I'm more or less a Freudian (in the same way that all of us are Copernican and Darwinian) and my father is the kind of straight-arrow who never padded an expense account or fudged on taxes. I take no credit, but I've had my father's honesty parentally incorporated into my psyche, though maybe not about expense accounts and taxes. But I could never stick up a 7-11, or even be a telemarketer for the Police Benevolent Fund. First, it's wrong; second, it's too theatrical for my taste; and third, I'm forgetful. I don't have enough of the gray K. A crook, like the philanderer or anybody dishonest, needs a good memory. (*The getaway car? It's here someplace.*) I'd be a failure at crime. Whatever I did to scrape up money for homesteading on my worthless estate would have to be more or less on the up and up.

Finding the Minimum

Anyway, not to trumpet the obvious, but it struck me. I wouldn't need much. Just as I'd bought the land for almost nothing, I'd built the house for almost nothing. Ditto for my car. It's a piece of flowing beater shit, but I owe no payments.

I'd apply the same principle to homesteading in general. No loans or payments for anything. I've never been a consumer anyway. Monster television screen? Fifty cubic feet of freezer? DVD stereo? I don't need that shit. So what does one need? Utilities? Be your own utility (I'll show you how). Garbage collection and water? It's free with a little effort. Grub? Gotta have it, but the truth is America is one of the cheapest places in the world to get food if you're willing to snip coupons, snag bargains, dive the dumpsters, haunt the commodity giveaways, get on food stamps, and buy staples in bulk.

Medical Costs. *Now here's the deal breaker on the road to freedom — medical.*

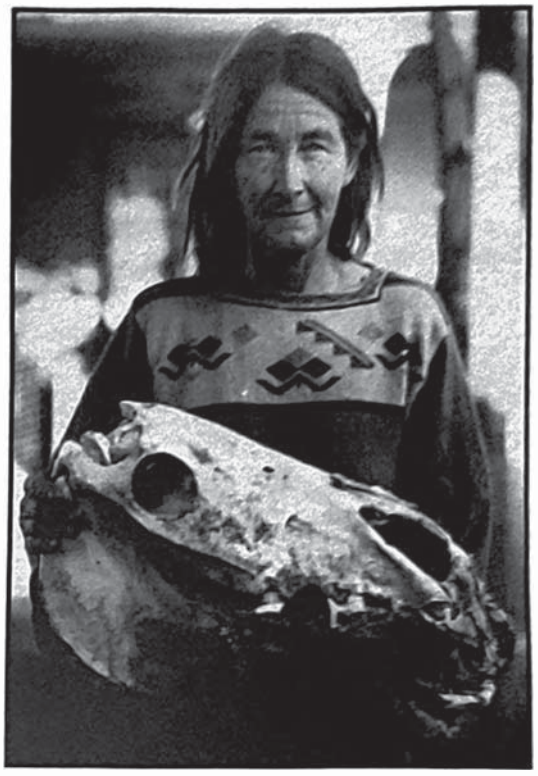
It's no good saying that 50 years ago only fifteen percent of Americans had health insurance or that 100 years ago nobody had it. Right, you say, and life expectancy was forty-seven. You couldn't get codeine from an HMO and you *begged* to die at forty. The best possible health insurance is to tuck away three healthy squares, snooze for eight, brush and floss, and get in a walk. Nobody wants to hear that kind of moralizing. They want to be *covered*. And it's expensive to buy into an HMO like Kaiser on your own. I don't know the answer.

In my own case, like many of my fellow desert dwellers (except the Hobo), I'm covered by the VA. I offered up a portion of my youth on the altar of my country and got a couple of free trips out of it, too. Here's the deal. Since I wasn't wounded while in the shadow of the flag, I don't get any special breaks but the VA still offers a good package. An office visit, *for any reason*, costs fifty bucks. Clean ear wax? Fifty. In-office amputation of a finger? Fifty. A sojourn at the VA hospital is the same principle: one low fixed rate, whether it's a coronary bypass or removal of a planter's wart. Yes, it's true; VA standards are not highly regarded in some circles. But I'll tell you what. It's a sovereign cure for hypochondria to be sitting in a VA waiting room with a bunch of guys who got no legs.

Anyway, my own VA experiences — limited to dermatology — have been positive. I wouldn't hesitate to go to them for trauma, too, if the Geo rolls and I'm still of this world. As for that long term care or catastrophic coverage following the drool-inducing cerebral hemorrhage... I have *Health Plan of the .38.*

Spending. So let's review. Mortgage, car payment, utilities, water, garbage. Nothing else except gifts; J.R., out of the kindness of his heart, will deliver 400 gallons of salty water from his secret well every once in awhile, and on Christmas and his birthday, recipients give him a couple of cartons of cigarettes. Food runs about two bills a month. Gasoline for local use, $30 a month. Medical, case by case, but averaging, say, $25 a month. Regular maintenance of the 'stead. Let's guess $40. So far, $295, right? Travel, entertainment, and walking around money. Everything else.

J.R., hunkered down inside a stack of truck tires. Irascible, tempermental, stubbornly independent, he has frequently rescued lost hunters and other desert travelers having a bad day.



J.R.'s wife, Lorilee, with the skull of her beloved and recently deceased pet horse, a descendent of racing legend Man-of-War.

Typically, my spending tops out at about a grand a month, which includes quite a bit of budget travel. Now, if I could forego such travel and a varied life, I could get by on about $4,000 a year. It's not a princely sum, and easily earned in a few months of seasonal work, even if it's in the melon sheds. Skip, a homesteader I know in Fall River Mills, gets by on that sum, the proceeds from his buffalo herd. But the other homesteaders out here couldn't make it on that budget because of gasoline. They have big guzzling trucks, generators, and all sorts of sand buggies. My Geo, on the other hand, gets about 45 miles per gallon, freeway. It's a solace to think about this car's gas economy, as once again I'm jacking its wheels out of a gravel sink

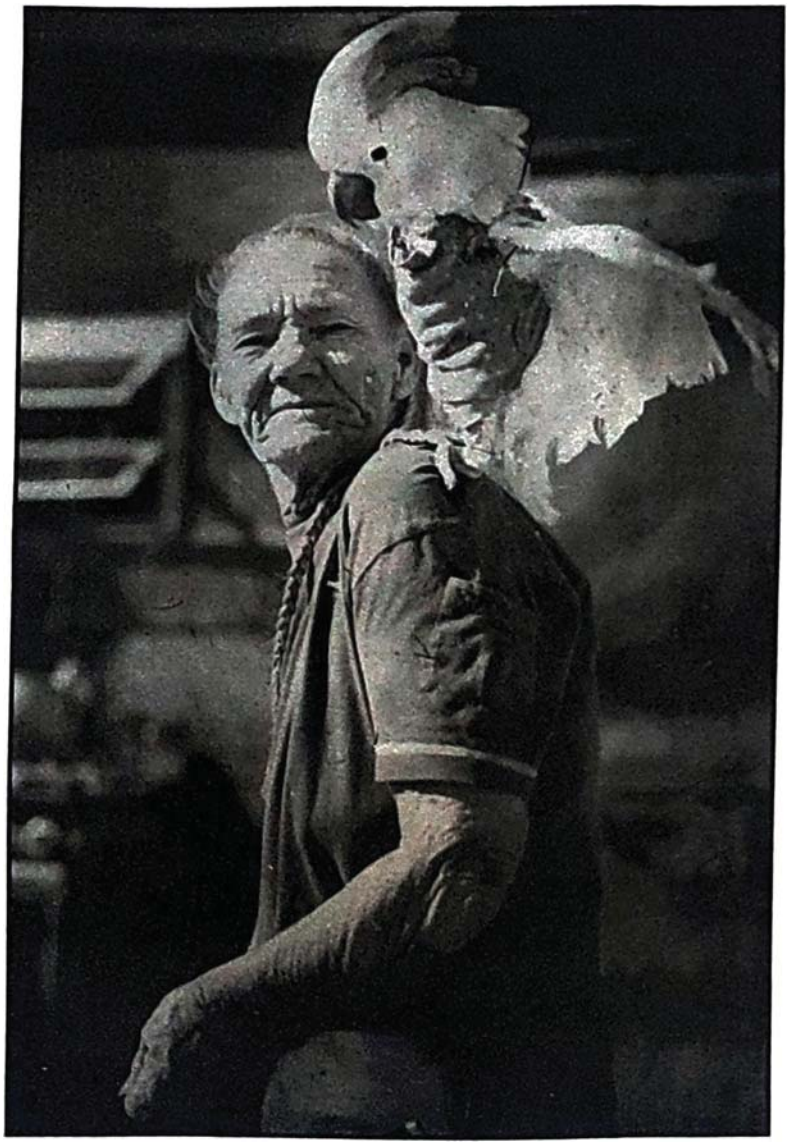
Anyway, the homesteader, unless he's pensioned or working some other racket, probably'll need to do a little something for ready.

Income

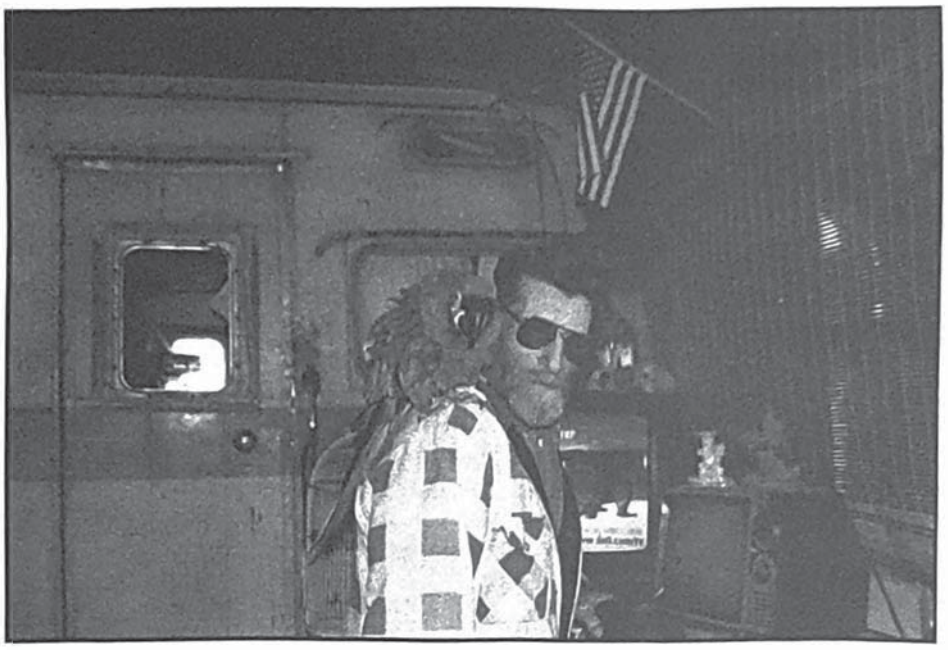
Welcome to Wal-Mart and do you want fries with that?

Oh, the shit jobs I have known. When I call the Rancho a homestead, this is not to imply that it is self-sufficient. I don't mean to suggest there's a flourishing garden ushering bounty to the

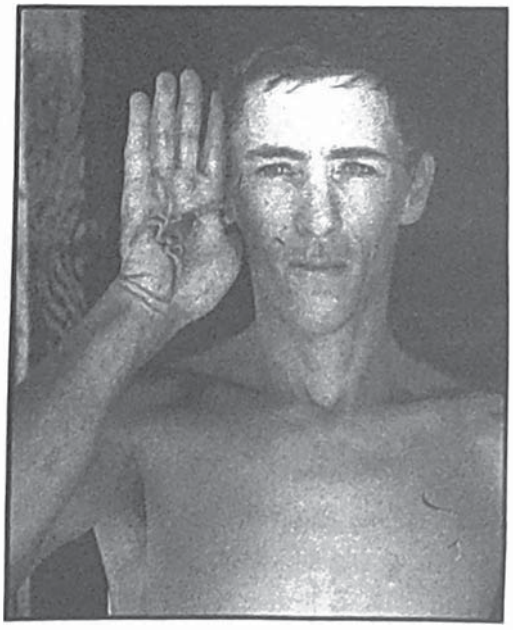
table, or that animal husbandry provides hide, tallow, and flesh. The Rancho doesn't even have a chicken. The garden is still the vision thing. Frankly, the desert isn't likely to blossom under the hand of the dirt cheap desert homesteader. The cheap desert land that an individual is likely to find for sale will be unfertile for agriculture. It's foolish to think about raising crops for money. The soil is like Alka-Seltzer. Five-hundred feet to water, and it's salt. Sure, Mom Tukes has a little vegetable garden for the table, but she hauls in the soil.



Ma Tuke, matriarch of desert pioneers, with a pet cockatoo. The waistcoast prevents the bird from pecking itself.



Pa Tuke with one of the birds.



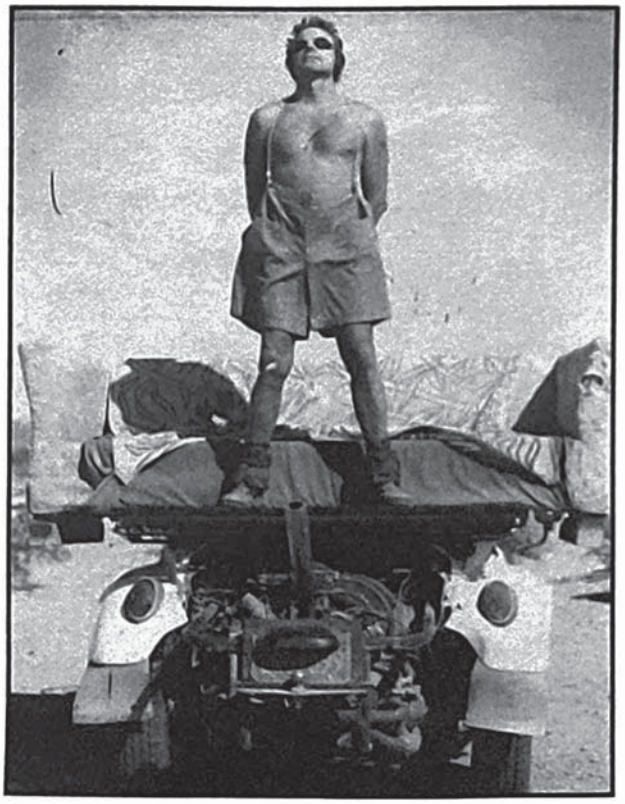
Boy Tuke with scorpion. *An untutored naturalist, Boy Tuke is an encyclopedia of lore about the desert critters.*

Money from the Land. Indian Phil made some dough on his property by letting people dump old tires, but he ended up in a shoot-out with the deputy. J.R. has run the gunnery range at night collecting .50 caliber brass and aluminum tail fins from spent ordnance. That kind of midnight salvage is illegal, and one of these days he might run his Mad Max cart over a live one and blow himself to smithereens. The meth cookers, of course, have made the desert bloom, but they're a sorry, worthless lot, their skin crawling with gang tats and their black hearts imbued with the ethics of a sewer rat.

My idea, broached one night long after the keg, was to make money by allowing urban sewer districts to dump their sludge — they prefer the term bio-solids — on the Rancho. I would then dry farm cotton and collect federal insurance when the crop failed. I was hooted down as a Quixotic visionary.

Therefore, the dirt cheap homesteader better make up his mind that he needs a small cash income for the necessaries. And this cash will come from a temporary job. Just like the sailboat cruisers, he'll work a few months to build up the cruise kitty for the rest of the year.

Temp Jobs. Let's review the options. As the owner of a paid-for desert estate, the homesteader blithely shrugs off the main work imperative of his cringing city cousin who needs to cover the rent or mortgage. But the homesteader still has to bring in the groceries and fill the gas tank.



The Hobo takes the sun atop the Clampett-mobile. When he works as a substitute teacher in Blythe, 45 miles from his homestead, he camps each night in the desert outside of town, using the sofa for a bed.

The Hobo, who has a college degree, works as a substitute teacher in the Blythe school district for a few months every year. Blythe always is desperate for subs and pays $100 a day. It doesn't matter if you know anything; it's just baby sitting. To be a sub in California (and the rules are similar in other states), you need the degree plus one punch, passing a simple test which demonstrates minimal literacy and math competence. Generally, when subbing in Blythe, the Hobo sleeps for free in the desert. He has scrounged mattresses from dumpsters and spotted them around the outskirts of Blythe in the washes, usually on BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land. For a while, he carried a full-sized couch in the back of his Volks bug since he had hollowed the back out for a small truck bed. For bathing, the Hobo uses the inlet of the irrigation canal that waters the valley. He hops in the flood and swims against the current for a few minutes. Every morning, he eats two "Sunshine Specials ($1.99 each) at Kmart. Thus, most of the school paycheck can go into the homestead kitty with plenty left for a three-month summer vacation of hiking in the Sierra.

The Hobo actually has a summer job as well. He guides executive hobo rail treks. Yes, some people are so insulated from experience that they will *pay* for someone to show them how to hop freights.

Another long-time resident. Alba the Dog Lady lives in a small trailer with a dozen dogs and thirty cats.

My old high school pal Wolf used to work construction. Now he feeds the homestead kitty by heading a crew of seasonal fire fighters for a couple of months each summer when the western forests light up. Lots of seasonal fire fighters spend six months on the line, six months recuperating in Mexico. He started out as a regular $8-an-hour seasonal fire fighter but worked up to a hot shot crew and now makes about $15. The hot shot crews set the back fires meant to burn up the brush and slash and other fuel in front of an on-coming blaze. They're also out in front cutting down burning snags with chain saws. It's glamour work but dirty. A day on a smoky fire is like chain-smoking six packs of Camels, and there's a lot of blood in the Kleenex.

When he's laid off with the first rains, he collects unemployment for six months. This seems like a plan with legs on it. A thing of beauty. Global warming, endless droughts, falling water tables, chronic mismanagement of public lands by the Forest Service and the BLM, heedless development, and rapacious logging of the fire-resistant big trees, all guarantee a bright future for seasonal fire fighters. But here's the kicker. Wolf, doing the Double-A Twelve step, and grimly ascetic and health conscious for the last two decades, is in pretty good shape. There's a physical test to be a seasonal fire fighter. The applicant has to be able to walk (or shuffle) three miles in 45 minutes carrying 40 pounds. Lots of girls and geezers seem to be able to do this, but it ain't that easy. I timed myself once (without the pack). I can cover three miles in 45 minutes (barely). I'm sure I could carry 40 pounds three miles. I'm just not so sure I could do them concurrently, and I haven't put it to the test yet.

Unemployment. Another possible hurdle. My friend John says it isn't ethical to scam unemployment insurance. It tears the social fabric. Unemployment is designed for a noble purpose, to help the fallen in corporate buyouts and mergers get back on their feet. It's meant to tide the trembling jobless along a bit while they actively seek work. It isn't meant to fill the beer coolers of those actively avoiding work until it's time to go back to the woods. True, it isn't exactly welfare. It's an insurance fund underwritten jointly by corporations and grunts. The majority of the money comes from middle-class peons who will never draw any of it, or if they do, only briefly, because their middle-class obligations are too weighty to allow them to dawdle for long unemployed on $200 a week.

From those who do draw unemployment with no intention of finding work, I have heard the usual rationalizations. I have heard Bohemian artiste poseurs who claim their annual sojourn on unemployment is like a government grant to the arts. Wolf says that he needs six months R&R after the fire season, and somebody better pay for it. One of the desert dwellers in the Smoke Tree mentioned that society, if it only knew, would be damn glad that some of these people weren't on the streets looking for money. I report without comment.

Even so, let's face it, for the desert homesteader, the appeal of the monthly unemployment check can be like a siren. Work a few months on a seasonal job, get laid off, collect unemployment, repeat. I've tried it myself. Actually, my scheme went awry.

Postal Work. I took a job as a seasonal letter carrier for the Post Office, but I got fired after a week, too soon to earn enough to qualify for unemployment. I always thought that being a mailman would be pretty easy. It certainly didn't look hard. But I didn't know that you had to case the mail, which meant sorting letters and packages into hundreds of pigeon holes in a three-sided cage. Boring and hard. And even carrying the mail was too much for me. (Next time, watch the mailman. He carries the first class letters in his hand, the magazines and other flats on his wrist, and the junk mail on his arm.) I didn't have that kind of dexterity and balance.

I got fired for smashing one of those boxy mail vans. I was on a driving route in Ukiah in a tract-house subdivision, slowly cruising the curb and pushing the mail into the curbside boxes

from the right side of the van. I came to a house where the mailbox had been knocked down and was leaning against the fence on the other side of the sidewalk. In the three-day postal college, the teacher had emphasized, "Never leave the van with the motor running." If you leave the van for any reason, turn off the motor, set the brake, and lock the doors. But I was just going to hop across the sidewalk. At that moment, the homeowner came out to tell me what happened to the mailbox. Darn kids, blah, blah. Her husband would fix it that evening.

I gave her the mail, turned around... *and the truck was gone.* Disappeared. Nowhere in sight. I looked right, left. I looked up. No van. Then I looked across the street. The van was slowly backing up a driveway. I must have had the wheels cocked, and when the van somehow popped out of park and into reverse, it had made a J-turn. The van missed a parked car; it missed one of those above-ground natural gas meters. Then it plowed into the front door of a little grandma unit at the end of the driveway and stove the door right in. By that time, I'd sprinted over and switched off the engine. I went over to the flattened door and shouted inside, "It's your letter carrier." At least I looked official, wearing a blue postal shirt and one of those gray pith helmets. At first, the occupant, a scruffy guy in a singlet, seemed peeved, but then he brightened up upon reflection. His house had been damaged by the government. But I got sacked.

Other Shit Jobs. I still had my eye set on collecting unemployment, so I took a temp job as a parking lot attendant at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire. I figured the fair would last just long enough to make me eligible. The boss assigned me to the employee lot used by the various concessionaries and the motley performers — the jugglers, fools, fencers, jousters, wenches, villains, and varlets who take part in the annual Elizabethan spectacle. My job was to insist on the parking rules in a lot filled with pari-colored Volkswagen buses sporting bumper stickers that said, "Question Authority." Nobody wanted to park inside the chalked white lines. Everybody wanted to be an individual.

My biggest problem in the parking field had to do with the speeders. A fenced-in tent campground for the performers adjoined the dirt road leading to the lot. When a Volkswagen bus full of irreverent roisterers sped down the road, clouds of vile choking dust blew over the whole encampment. Happily, after my abject performance as a letter carrier, I was able to redeem myself by showing mettle as a parking lot attendant. I devised a way to make the punks slow down using nothing more than a few orange cones.

I set the orange cones in a line down the middle of the dirt road. Then I sat in a chair at the end of the road wearing a yellow vest that said "Parking." Okay, so now when the young blades in the Deadhead bus wheeled out of the lot when, lo, they had to confront the moral dilemma of the cones. Obviously, the intent was to force their free-spirited exit to the right side of the cones. But they would not do it. They drove on the left side of the cones, despite the parking lot attendant sitting in a chair looking right at them. Not only that, they rubbed their disrespect for authority right in his nose. They drove slowly and majestically on the wrong side of the cones, just to spite the officious attendant for trifling with their liberties. Clearly, I had talent. But I never collected unemployment on this one either, because a few weeks later I took a short-lived job as the editor of a country weekly.

In my own experience, the best bet for the homesteader is the seasonal gig with the government. For me, it isn't fire fighting but mosquito abating. You start out as a journeyman and after awhile become a master abater. That's the joke for the new hires. The job is almost perfect. It's outside work, loosely supervised, and the results are hard to quantify.

After a 7 a.m. "coffee up" with the other techs at the office, I'd leave the corporation yard in a beige truck... and disappear over the horizon. I checked water sources where mosquito larvae

were known to congregate. I also patrolled, taking long walks in the marshes, a dip stick over my shoulder, looking for puddles and pools that might hold wrigglers. At first, I thought I was putting one over on the county, getting in my usual morning walk on company time. Fact of the matter was I found mosquitoes. One time I was sitting on a levee, eating a sandwich, when I came under heavy assault by aedes squaminger — the hard-biting salt marsh mosquito. I stumbled onto an until-then unknown maze of flooded cracks in a far pasture, mosquitoes pouring out of the ground. I came back with a fogger and zapped them, while of course leaving enough alive for seed stock.

One time to make a few bucks, I collected signatures to get a political initiative on the ballot. The company paid a quarter for every signature you bagged. I set up an ironing board in front of the supermarket and accosted shoppers as they emerged with their laden carts. One of the other guys doing this was a pro who collected signatures year-round. He said the secret was the funny hat. Also, he said to keep half a dozen clipboards going at once, and never waste time arguing the merits of the initiative. I wound up writing a piece about him for *California Magazine.*

For one of my shit jobs, I delivered advertisers newspapers once a week. The deal was put out a thousand papers Thursday night for seventy-five bucks. I figured a fair wage for this ought to be $25 an hour, and found that I could circulate about 250 papers in three hours afoot. The rest had to go to the same address, so the Cherry Valley Elementary School paper recycling program did well that year. I didn't just toss the bundles in the dumpster, but at the midnight hour, I cut the bands and spread the papers evenly, then covered them with thin panoply of regular newspapers. The advertisers were destined for the recycling bin anyway. I did away with the unreliable middleman, and I think, at some higher level of ecology, it was the right thing to do.

To reprise. The homesteader probably is going to need a little cash, and may have to hire on for occasional short-term shit jobs. You're looking for something easy, fun if possible, and laxly supervised. If for any reason the work becomes onerous, if an overseer *dares* suggest your pace isn't sufficiently snappy, you can just toss him your colored hat, and find something else. A shit job doesn't mean you have to take any shit.

The Apology

Sometimes, as I gently rock in my hammock under the shade *ramada* at the desert homestead, I muse a little over the concatenation of circumstances that have landed me at a sandbag hogan in the inhospitable desert. ("Aunt Helen is 'inhospitable,' " says my sister. "What you mean probably is 'uninhabitable.' " Ha, ha. But she's never been out here.)

Well, historically, I always looked for the easy way around a problem, particularly the puzzle of how to gain a living. Right from openers, I was never much of a student. High school was wasted on me. I made delta grades and didn't pay attention. I was not educated or well read, although I read a lot for my own entertainment. I joined the Navy for the free travel and to get out of the house but never rose higher than E-3. The calisthenics were difficult for me, particularly that one where you raise your right hand to your eyebrow. The word "sir" did not roll off my tongue. My MOS pretty much was "goldbrick."

After a few years at college, I knew I had few natural skills, little knowledge, and limited marketability. I had no passion for hard work. I wasn't ambitious, or even lucre-driven. I didn't believe in the importance or sanctity of labor, since it seemed to me it's the truth that the many must work for the few. I saw that my place in the hierarchy would be right in there among the

common ruck of mopes, the peons put here on earth to serve our betters. Undoubtedly, this kind of lazy half-ass cynicism sapped my will to power.

I couldn't help viewing all the pushing work-a-daddies of the world as pre-programmed Stepford chumps with septic propaganda in the blood. "Work hard and make something of yourself." "Strive, and you'll succeed." And all the other improving bromides, sans anything quite as bold as, perhaps, "Piss your peon life away for his lordship."

I couldn't escape the suspicion that... well, sort of like what SNCC's Stokley Carmichael used to say, "There are field niggers and there are house niggers." His meaning was a little different, but by extrapolation... even if by dint of plucky effort I shouldered my way into the middle ranks, earned a bundle, was favored with a mortgage, made payments on an SUV Ford Intransigence, or a sleek Lexus Sepiku, or a sporty Buick Intern, still, my essential *condition* would not change. I'd just be polishing silver instead of chopping cotton.

Maybe it would be different if I were smart. But I had to let that bird go free early on, after I attended a couple of family reunions and saw my gene pool. The biological laws of Mendel were immutable and harsh, for fruit flies and for people. I had to face it: being a smart ass was not the same thing as being smart.

No matter. A profession was out of the question anyway. *The grind*! I didn't even have the academic push to get a BA. I was a sophomore for three years, and only got as far as I did because the state college I attended conducted a misguided and short-lived experiment with grade-yourself courses. They were the only "A"s I ever got, although I never showed up for any of the grade-yourself classes. "Grade yourself" kept the nose of my GPA just above the waves for awhile. In the end, my being unable to graduate firmly shut the most obvious door. Usually people of my willowy character wind up as teachers. *No!* The thought of grading some little puke's grimy scrawl appalled me. And at any rate I was afraid of the cruel mockery of children.

The other obvious alternative for one of my indolent stripe was to become some kind of ward of or parasite on the government, usually by working for it. According to those amusing French and Russian novels, a sinecure in the government might be the salvation of an idler or a dilettante in the old days. Stendahl wrote "The Red and the Black" by the office fire while drawing a paycheck from some cush post in the Imperial bureaucracy. I was sure plenty of other chair warmers were merely content to read the papers. But a government post today in Samland U.S. of A.? Fear-ridden over-controlled servitude of stultifying boredom, pushing meaningless paper around a cube. The horror.

Finally, I applied to one of my roommates, more sagacious than the rest, for advice. "Dave," I said. "I'm broke and without prospects. I've blown my GI Bill on flying lessons. I can't hide out here in college much longer. What should I do?"

"Well," he said, "at this crucial juncture, you need to coldly appraise yourself. I've only known you these few short years, but it strikes me you wouldn't be good for anything important; I'd have to say you're lazy, self-absorbed, glib and facetious, always ready to mock the suggestions of others, but never offering anything positive of your own. Intellectually shallow, no tap root anywhere, spiritually neutered, without feeling or compassion, unsteady of focus, lacking the fortitude for the long pull, with no fixed belief in anything."

I shook his hand and thanked him. The acuity of his analysis made my path clear. I could see it immediately. My only hope lay in daily journalism.

The beauty of daily journalism is that it has no entry rules. You need no punch, badge, or diploma to get in. That doesn't mean anybody can do it, any more than anybody can solve algebraic equations. No talent is needed of course, but a slight bump does help. You needed a facile, nimble mind and twinkly fingers at the keyboard. No editor wants a stone-cutter for a

reporter. "Mosey your butt out there, nose around a little, figure out something, and write it up before three p.m. using subject, verb, predicate as a model." No further requirements.

I had a living, but I was still troubled by an abiding (although unfounded) sense of personal superiority that was always in an unpleasant head butting contest with reality. My lot in life? I was a metro newspaper reporter, an irreverent gadfly, an insouciant raconteur full of bubbly topical banter as wittily superficial as an amateur theatrical. And yet, no way to sugarcoat it, I was the help. No Master of the Universe. No cosseted scion of privilege. A Minnow of the Universe. The help.

"This is the job," said my editor at the *National Enquirer*, "Do it or get out." (That story happened to be, "Marlon Brando is the Biggest Cheapskate I've Ever Known," an interview with a Billings waitress whom the star allegedly had stiffed.)

What really chaffed me? Taking orders. The world is all hierarchy. It's the only effective way to accomplish anything. The ship will go on the rocks with a crew of anarchists. Well-adjusted people accept this. My stance, on the other hand, always is to scoff at and belittle my superiors. That's why I became an itinerant journalist. Because I've been fired so many times. I refer out loud to the editors' morning meeting as "the pigmies around the campfire," or to my colleagues thoughtful, incisive Op-ed piece as "another brick for the Pharaoh." At the after work cocktail hour at the Revere House (known humorously as "the MENSA meeting"), I tried my best to banish all talk about the bosses, no matter how vicious and cutting the commentary, since I felt such traffic gave our betters unmerited importance.

At the same time, no matter how lippy I got in public, deep down in the secret canker of my heart, the wormy truth is, I *felt* subservient. The mere happenstance of holding the rank "employee" made me feel servile in the presence of the perfectly pedestrian, usually well-meaning dimwit who happened to be the boss. I would try to talk myself out of it. When called on the carpet for some infraction, I would say to myself, "This is just poor mush-brained Joe Smedlap in that glass office. A pitiful flawed mortal without magic powers." But it didn't work, I admit. I felt dread. My palms oozed, my stomach fluttered. I've noticed most others suffer the same before authority. They inwardly cringe before the lawful scepter, even those who, like me, adopt a rebel stance. You can't help it. It's difficult to strike a pose when the truth is, in the workplace: you're just another one, easily replaced.

Now the miracle. This sick feeling of subservience always evanesced immediately when I got fired. Instantly. The Boss morphed into a puny bloodless creature of no consequence that would be well advised to lower his gaze when he crosses my path.

So at last a sort of stuttering epiphany stole over me this last time that I got fired for the usual cause (insubordination). Maybe I'm not cut out for a regular career-like job. Sure, sometimes I could stand some very short-term, seasonal, temporary, easy shit work to feed the kitty. Just give me nothing serious, hard or demanding where another human being is given the right to question anything I do. Is that too much? I don't think so, although the consequent unsettled barometer may mean tucking in a reef or two and easing the sheets, financially speaking. But that was it. I wouldn't work anymore. All I had to do was figure out how to... get by on almost nothing.

Chapter Six
Land

The Smoke Tree Valley. Plenty of Nothing.

Yes, before my latest job misfortune, I was already a land baron, owner of, ha, ha, *Rancho Costa Nada*, ten worthless and desolate acres in the Southern California desert about twenty miles from the miniscule hamlet of Palo Verde. Other estates in the vicinity with cute names are *Rancho Nogotta*, and *Rancho Elbow Greaso*.

My deed says ten acres. It might as well be 1,000. I have no cheek-by-jowl neighbors, and three miles to the nearest. My dusty unwatered scatter shimmers in a lonely, out-of-the-way valley surrounded by hundreds of square miles of bone-dry barren landscape. The inhabitants are a handful of seldom-seen desert rats and homesteaders, their presence only revealed by a faraway

triangular column of dust thrown up from their rattle-trap pickups. Perhaps a few meth cookers live out here too, in one of those isolated, seemingly abandoned, trailers, but I don't know them.

Purchased on a lark, the Rancho originally wasn't meant to be homesteaded. I bought it as sort of a retreat, I guess, and friends and I immediately started visiting the Rancho a few weekends per year (despite the five-hour drive from LA) to put the land to its highest and best use as a range for skeet shooting and target practice.

What? Alright, let's step back. You want to know *exactly* how I was able to become a land baron for almost no money? With wide open sky in every direction, I am the master of vast space where it's safe to discharge firearms without alarming the neighbors or bringing a visit from the cops.

Getting the Land

A few years ago while traveling as a regional reporter for a newspaper, I noticed an ad for an auction of tax defaulted property in Imperial County. It sounded like a story — crusty rural characters bidding on distressed real estate of uncertain provenance and worth. It turned out most of the offerings were small lots around the Salton Sea. Also on the block was some acreage in the bleak desert southwest of Blythe.

The prospectus listed a couple of parcels, ten acres each, with opening bids of $100. What the heck? I started bidding on a ten-acre parcel without a thought about where it was or what it looked like. Did I care? It was realty. Land. I had a tepid competitor, but when the gavel fell, I became a land baron for the total price, paperwork included, of $325.

When I went to pay up and collect the deed, the clerk in the assessor's office said, "You'll never find this. It's in the middle of nowhere. There're no survey stakes that you'll ever find."

Evidently, she hadn't heard about GPS. With a $100 GPS (which I already had), you can find anything. All you need is a topographical map that shows both range and township and latitude and longitude. A friend, his wife, and I made up the little expedition, and with the aid of satellite global positioning, we soon pitched our tents out in the middle of my new property.

Topographically, the Rancho sits on an alluvial wash dotted with Smoke Tree, Palo Verde, barrel cactus, and scrub. It's seventeen miles from a paved road. Happily, however, the property is within half a mile of a sometimes-maintained (by the Marines) washboard dirt road. The crust over the wash, generally speaking, is firm enough to support a light vehicle, although trucks without four-wheel drive can get bogged in the talcum-like sand. But I get out there in my Geo Metro.

Birth of the Rancho

Although we all tented at first, Gordon on the next trip built a plywood outhouse (he preferred the term sauna) for his wife. Despite this amenity, she never returned. Well, as strictly a weekend getaway, there isn't much to entice distaff visitors. The pleasures of the Rancho weekend seemed to be drinking, shooting, and rocketry.

During the early visits the ferocious winds regularly twirled up the awnings and tents, no matter how securely pegged, and sent them spinning across the desert. It's also very dusty. The temperature varies widely, from a blistering 120 degrees in summer to winter akin to Chicago. Winter visitors sometimes huddle around the campfire wrapped in blankets like winos over a

steam grate. So, basically, Rancho Costa Nada was a guy thing with appeal mostly to a group of a half-dozen newspaper types who were gun enthusiasts.

But as time passed, comforts increased. Thanks to a friend's bent for carpentry, a shade shack sprang up, closed on three sides against wind and sun. A long table for bench shooting appeared. Then the carpenter, fed up with pitching and retrieving his tent, built a sleeping cube; it looked something like the Kabala in downtown Mecca, except that it houses nothing more holy than a metal cot.

Since at that time I still had a job, and only visited the Rancho irregularly, I opted for the easier-to-build bum box, modeled after an architectural experiment for the urban indigent living under freeway overpasses. This was a plywood box 8' long by 4' high, raised on short stilts, sort of like the coffin on display in the funeral home, sans the floral tributes. It was open on the eastern side, and one sort of rolled in. It had a curtain, like the berth in a Pullman. For creaky bones, an elevated snoozing platform like this, with a mattress, beat sleeping on the ground. Snakes and scorpions couldn't get you, and the bum box offered protection against the desert gusts.

Desert Entertainment

As for the sport, the first acquisition was a spring-loaded clay pigeon tosser for skeet shooting. Then some shooting enthusiasts from work came out to set up the rifle and pistol ranges. The 100 yard marker was a metal railroad plate painted orange and hung from chains between fence stakes. The targets were backed by a pile of sandbags to sop up the misses. For extreme ranges, we fired at barrels from the top of the shed. The shed put us above the shrubbery, provided a better view, and plunging fire didn't skip as much. Even though nobody lived within three miles of the Rancho (and we didn't know about *them* for over a year), we had seen off-roaders on dune buggies and quads.

The pistol range still features standard paper targets, pie plates, and silhouettes. A special area has been set aside for plinking empty beer bottles with the .22s while we're sitting around the fire in camp chairs waiting for the beans and franks to sizzle that keeps the broken glass in one place. After a while, I shovel it up and use the glass shards to help stabilize the sandbags on the pistol range.

Rocketry came to the Rancho with a morning-after realization that without an evening activity, the drinking side of camp life might begin to predominate. We started out with small rockets purchased at the hobby shop, then progressed almost immediately to the biggest rockets (four-footers) we could buy. And then, because of the $15-per cost of the big motors, we fell back to more modest intermediate vehicles.

For night launches, light sticks go inside the transparent core of the rocket body. Not only is this a crowd pleaser, but the fluorescent green glow makes the rockets easy to retrieve out on the desert floor. The hobby rocket kits include rinky-dink AA battery-operated ignition panels to touch off the engines. Too unreliable and namby-pamby — we ignite the rocket motors straight off a car battery.

I almost forgot another attraction for weekend visitors. The Rancho abuts the Chocolate Mountain Naval Gunnery Range. At breakfast the first morning in camp, we heard the scream of jets, then the thud and concussion of heavy explosive. Ten miles to the south, slate gray clouds of smoke began to blossom. Fun, huh? Coffee and bombs. But it gets better. At night, the Marines

bring in the helicopter gun ships. Red tracers slant earthward, accompanied by the comforting "*budda budda budda*" of .50 calibers. Light show. Neat.

The main draw of the Rancho for my office-bound urban friends remains the shooting. There are not that many places to go these days in Southern California where it's safe and permitted to fire guns on private property. Some of these guys are collectors and have arsenals they want to try out. What are they shooting? Jeez. These are the ones I recognize: Colt M-15s, Springfield 30.06s, Enfield .303s, M1s, Kalashnikovs, SKS variants, dozens of .45 caliber pistols, plus a bunch of foreign stuff I've never seen before.

So. On the eve of the homestead experiment, there lay the heat-blasted, wind-whipped Rancho. Basically, is was a shooting gallery, empty brass glittering in the sun, with a couple of rude sheds for shade. Not that promising, perhaps, but it was my land, bought and paid for.

Conversations with the Demented Vet, III

"Lunch time already? I'd lost track of the hour until I saw that red merde-mobile *coming up the road. What could be bringing Phil all the way from his endangered Desert Turd-hole? Oh yeah. Lunch. You might try a restaurant some time. Although I gotta tell ya, I never eat at restaurants. Too expensive for one thing, arm and a leg, but also it's like putting a loaded taco to your head and pulling the trigger.*

"You don't know what's going on back there in the kitchen. Guys who just waded ashore are rolling your burrito. A month before they were squatting in the bushes and drinking out of a puddle. Now they're chopping veggies for the salad bar. You think the salad bar is healthy? The salad bar? *People sneezing in the Jell-O, Phil? People scooping up the garbanzos with their fingers? That lettuce that was soused with DDT south of the border, Phil? Sliced and diced by Typhoid Mary. Hepatitis clinging to every leaf.*

"You worked in a restaurant kitchen? Where? A Chinese joint. Phil, Phil, Phil. *Asian joints are the worst. You know what's-her-name here. You know I'm not a bigot. I don't care whether pooch comes straight up or sideways. When I first clapped eyes on that old girl, she was plugging shoots in a shit paddy. I ate Fido and Muffin at her mom's hooch. I've chowed down on so much rice in the last thirty years that I got an epicanthic fold on both eyes. But I would never eat at an Asian joint. They got no clue, Phil. It ain't the cockroaches and dirt that get you. Every kind of restaurant has roaches and a dirty floor. Every kind of restaurant has mice shit in the pantry and a stuffed up toilet in back. It's* improper holding temperature, *Phil, that gets your stomach pumped out at the ER. I learned this in the Army. The chow has got to be either refrigerated, or HOT. It can't sit around on the steam table in lukewarm water. The bacteria think it's Miami Beach. The Asians, Phil, they're frugal, like you Micks. Scotchman. Whatever damned thing. They throw away nothing. The soup kettle at that China joint. Huh? You remember? Nothin' wasted, dog, hog, or frog. They keep stuff on the steam table for WEEKS. No, I'm not exaggerating. Touch it up every once in awhile with some red dye.*

"But it doesn't matter what kind of restaurant these days, Phil. Go back in the kitchen. It's the Third World. Lavase las manos. *Yeah, right. You've been to Kosovo. Those people don't lavase las manos after a dump. They're right back in there kneading the falafel. They're punching the masa. Hepatitis, Phil. It's not a joke. I got it, Calcutta, 1978. Attaché banquet. Knocked down the*

escort like a whiff of grape. A year out of my life and my liver looks like a bath sponge. But plain old food poisoning is what you're gonna get around here. Any restaurant in town, Phil, any denomination. Look in the kitchen, if you wanna go on a crash diet. And even if you don't get e coli *or salmonella they still poison you.*

"A burger? Twenty-four grams of artery glue. Evan brought home a McMurder from town one time. I straightened up his ear with the back of my hand. Boy, don't bring that poison to my house. The American diet, Phil. Suet. *They've poisoned an entire generation. Look at those little flab buckets waddling around the park in town. A generation gone to blubber. Saturated fat. Trans fatty acids.*

"An American used to have a heart artery like a garden hose. We lived a healthy outdoor life, fishing, hunting, cooked a potato in the fire for lunch or brought an onion sandwich. Now look at them. Hearts of aspic. Out of breath if they have to cross the room. The internationals, Phil, destroying our youth from within to make a buck.

"And the sap parents going along with it because Lazy Mazy can't be bothered to cook a pot of beans. All that Borg channel propaganda aimed at gals to convince them that they're good mommies for feeding their brats gobs of lard that no actual good mom would dream of feeding her kids. Oh yeah, the Borg line aimed at men is just as bad. High testy manly men gobbling grease and salt without a thought for those alarming food labels that only a prissy faggot would look at. Despite the fact that that fat-dripping bacon macho burger is gonna bloat the stooges into cardiovascular and sexual cripples.

"I guess you're welcome to stay for lunch. We got some leftover rice and fish in the fridge. In the refrigerator, *Phil. We got a refrigerator here."*

Chapter Seven
The Hogan

A nutshell description of building the sleeping hogan in a week.

First, as always, I start with a principle. In this case, the principle is "The materials determine the house." I'd build according to what I'd managed to scrounge.

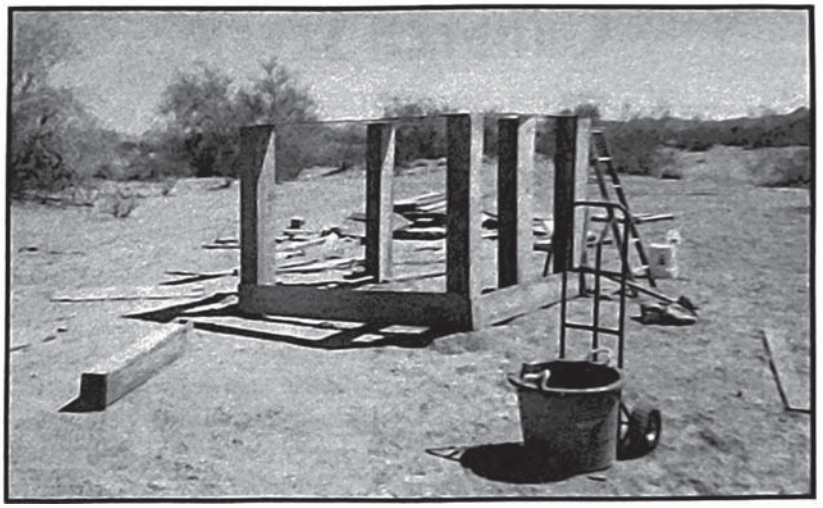
So, because I had no 2" by 4"s in the collection of scrap lumber I wound up with from Wood Charlie's, I opted to put up a post-and-beam shell sheathed with scrap plywood, with sandbags and newspaper bales in the voids for solidity.

Initial Building

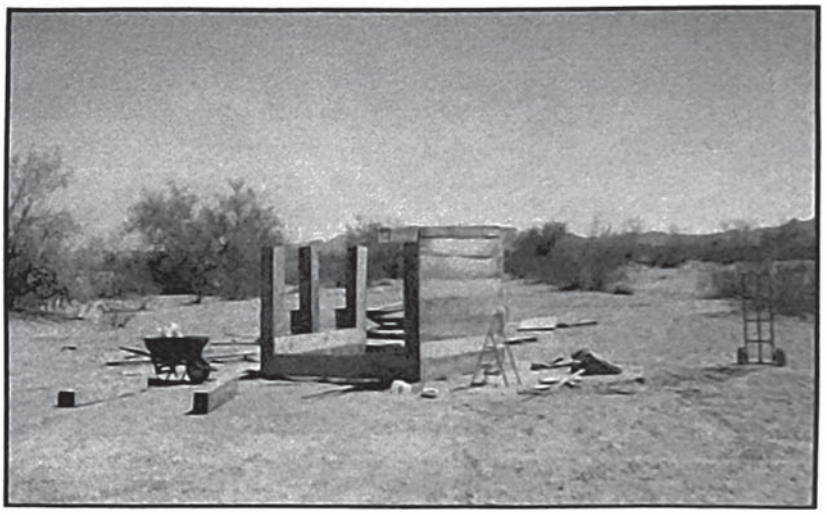
Glue-nailing together the posts and beams.

The posts were made of four of the six-foot-long 1" by 8" cedar boards and glue-nailed with six pennies and some generic tube glue. They were hollow in the center, of course, and pretty easy for one person to lift. To anchor them, I pounded a four-foot length of rebar (salvaged) into a shallow hole filled with rock and a concrete block. I set the hollow post over the rebar and on the cement block, then poured a little concrete mix into the hollow interior. When the mud had

set, I filled in the rest of the post with dirt. The first experiment post seemed pretty darn solid, and I went ahead.



The beginning of the sleeping cube. Hollow posts are used in lieu of studs.



The sleeping cube continues.

For the homestead's first unit, the 8′ by 8′ sandbag lined sleeping cube, I set up eight dirt-filled posts, and got them more or less square by nailing up pieces of scrap lumber to tie the corners. Then I put on the first course of three-eighths plywood (8′ by 16″) scrap sheathing around

the foot, inside and out. I started piling sandbags in the empty space between the inside and outside sheathing.

I also used another of Khalili's suggestions. He prefers barbed wire between each course of sandbags to help hold them together. If you don't have barbed wire, he said you could use the broken glass from beer bottles. This is what I had and what I used.

Sandbags. Filling sandbags was kind of a drag. My career total before starting the hogan was maybe five. For the first phase, the sleeping unit, I needed two hundred or so. I tried different ways to make it easier. I sat in a beach chair and filled them with a coffee can. I put the bag in a bucket to hold the neck open and tried it that way. In the Army, one guy held the bag and another shoveled, and then they traded off. But I filled the bags by myself, and of course the biggest problem was keeping the neck of the bag open when it was struck by a misdirected shovel of dirt.

It's dusty work too. I wore a dust mask and goggles, which was kind of unpleasant on a hot day. Usually, I would fill twenty or thirty bags right after breakfast while it was still cool. Sometimes I'd sit on a chair in the shade in the dry creek bed, where the sand is soft, and fill them with a small shovel. Sometimes I'd artfully arrange the bag inside a plastic bucket and gingerly shovel in the filling. I preferred a loose bag — not as heavy to carry and easier to tie the neck.

The sleeping cube. Sandbags fill the voids and are sheathed with scrap plywood. The posts, after being anchored with cement and rebar, are filled with dirt and gravel.

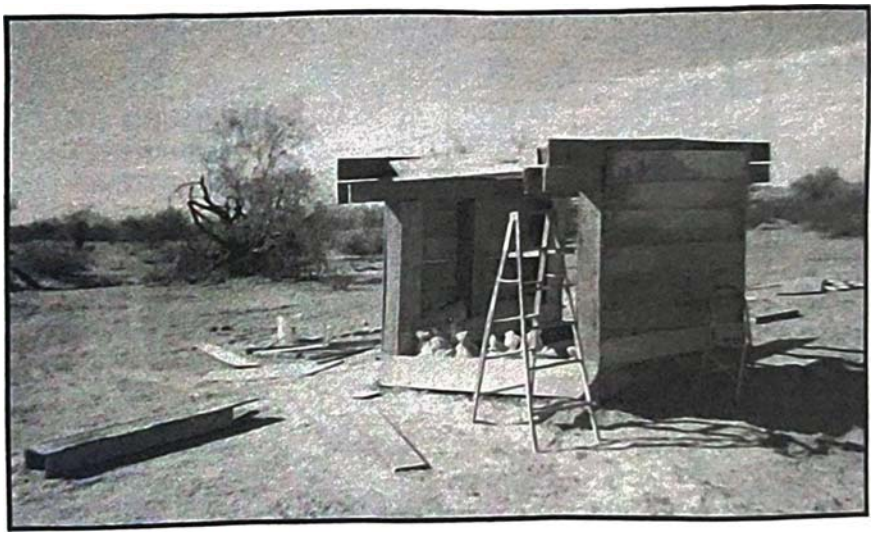
Another close-up of the sandbags inside the voids.

Floor. Building the sleeping hogan took about a week of sporadic trifling. I'd do a little something for awhile, then take a break, have some coffee, read a little bit, and think about the next move. The Hobo suggested that I ought to dig out the floor at least a foot so it'd be cooler inside. He also said to put one of the 100-gallon water tanks inside the hogan to sop up heat. My first idea had been to mix some cement and sand to spread around on the floor to form a crust that would be thick enough, I hoped, to dissuade burrowing critters, like the Hanta virus-carrying Kangaroo rat, from nesting in the floor boards. Digging seemed like a lot of work, but I was filling sandbags anyway, so once I had some shade-giving walls erected, I went ahead and dug out the floor. The resultant sandbags I piled around the perimeter inside to help sturdy the walls. This decreased the floor space, but what the heck? I wouldn't be pacing my cell. I can go outside for a walk. The hogan's for snoozing.

For a floor, I spread out a plastic tarp, and over that put down two layers of plywood panels. They were glued together and held down by the sandbags but not anchored to anything. Over that, a throw rug seemed good enough. For the floors in the rest of the compound under the *ramadas*, I just laid out plastic tarps held down by sandbags, and covered them with a collection of rugs from garage sales Bedouin style.

Walls. Now, as to the composition of the walls. The sandbags went up breast high. Breastworks. The rest of the way up, I filled the wall cavities with tied bales of the *Palo Verde Valley Times*. I wrapped these newspaper bales in cheap plastic bags I got at the 99 cent store. The idea here was to deter insects. While laying in the lower courses of sandbags, I found that my lackadaisical tamping had allowed some small voids to remain in the wall. After each course, I filled these in with a bucketful of damp dirt and cement.

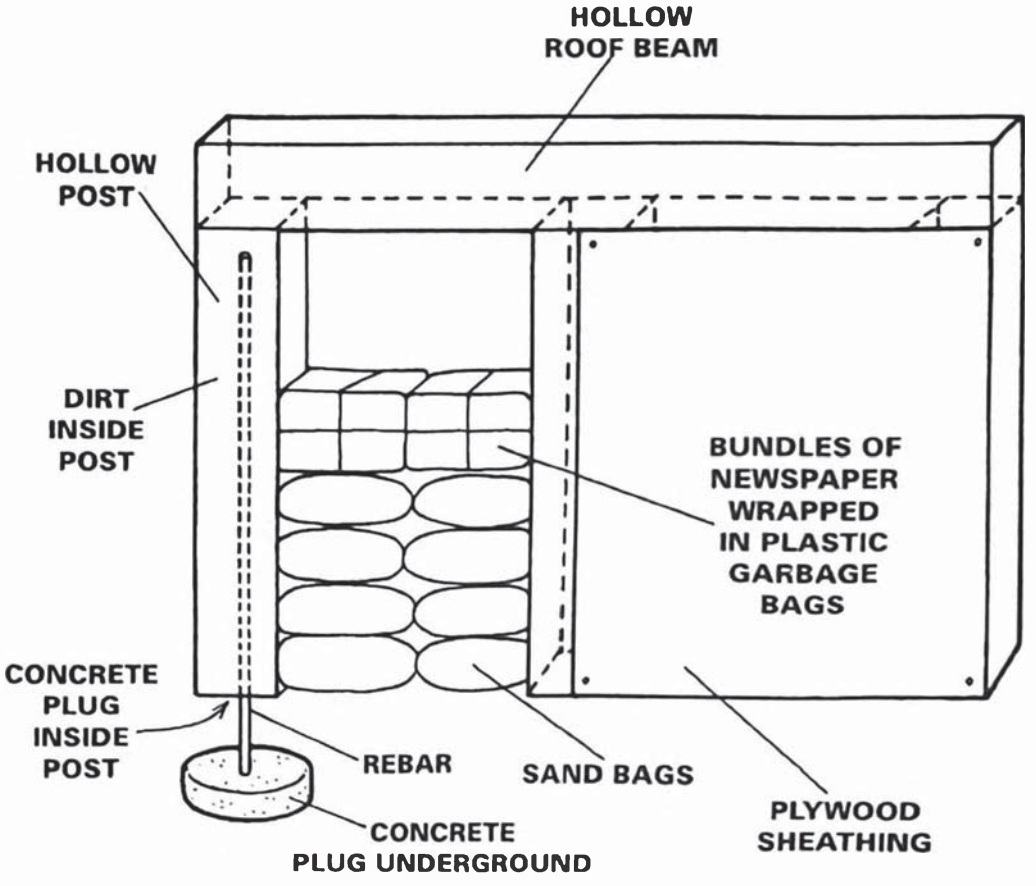
The interior of the sleeping cube before it was painted and wired.



The sleeping cube, the first unit of the hogan, went up in a leisurely week.

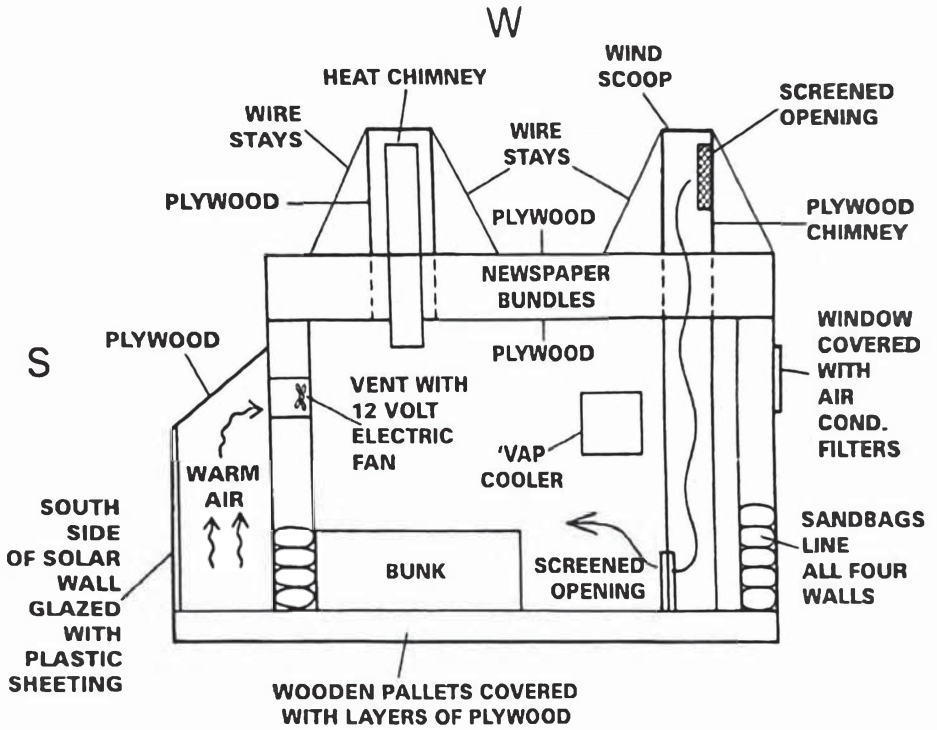
During quality control testing after completing the hogan, I found that the sandbags would stop a .303 from my Enfield at three feet. If the bullet by ill chance happened to hit one of the lackadaisical voids, it might punch through, but, that's pretty good. The newspaper bales, which were set in the wall flat side out on the topmost courses, would stop a slug from my .38 snub nose at close range. That was reasonable, but not up to Idaho survivalist standards. The .303 blasted right through the newspaper bale with such authority that I saw why the Enfield was the standard issue infantry battle rifle for Brits for over half a decade.

Well, everything is compromise. What's more likely — that I will be attacked by assassins with high caliber weapons or that my hogan will be shaken apart and demolished by an earthquake, leaving me up to my neck in sandbags? So far, nobody has shown enough interest in the Rancho to attack it. But I have been through an earthquake out here, and it's thought-provoking and impressive. That's why I only took the sandbags up five feet. I didn't want sandbags falling from higher than that. And, it also meant fewer bags to fill.



Some critics might mention that filling the walls of a habitation with newspapers sort of tempts the fire gods. That's true. To make the upper wall a little less flammable, I pour in mud around the bales. But even so, no doubt about it, this sucker will burn, if it ever gets going. I'm not a smoker, and I don't use open flame inside the hogan, but this is something to think about. Certainly, however, it's no more flammable than the average house trailer, which takes maybe 30 seconds to be totally consumed, once the elderly woman with the cigarette in her hand falls asleep on the couch.

Somebody may also mention that bales of newspaper probably don't insulate as well as sandbags. Okay, but right now, the insulating properties of the walls seem pretty darn good, keeping the sleeping box kind of cool on warm days, and toasty in winter once Mr. Heater fires up. No doubt the upper wall will lose some R-rating as the newspaper becomes brittle and turns to dust over the years. Over time, I'll probably lose some R-rating myself.



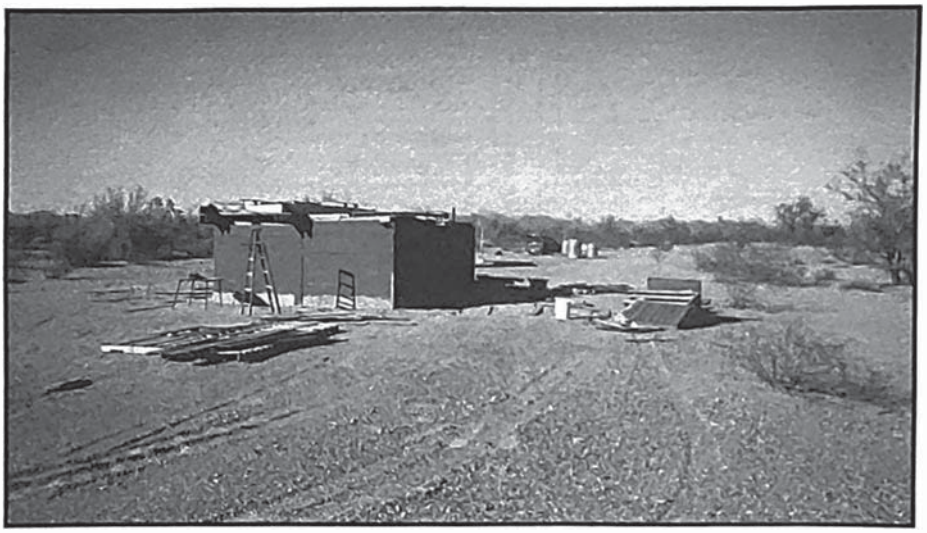
Roof. Since, as I said, I didn't want anything heavy over my head at night, I insulated the roof with regular insulation batts that I salvaged from an old abandoned trailer. (This is nasty work, pulling tattered fiberglass, and one must wear protective clothing, particularly a mask and good gloves.) I rewrapped the batts in plastic sheeting before putting them in the roof. The batts were lain on a ceiling of thin plywood strips. I used my dwindling supply of warped cedar boards for a couple of 12-foot roof beams and the roof joists. On top of these, I laid some half-inch plywood sheathing that came with the batch from Wood Charlie's.

The design in my head calls for a flat roof. What the heck? It's simple, and it hardly ever rains in the Smoke Tree, although there's a turd-floater every once in awhile. So that's why it's actually lucky that the roof has a slight hump in the center.

That happened by accident, largely because I didn't know what I was doing. The hollow roof beams, where they met in the center, weren't straight. Anyway, the plywood sheathing had enough sway in 'em, so they bent over the hump. When I finished off the hogan, I used a caulking gun to block out any remaining daylight. The hogan has been through a couple of storms and so far, not a drip inside. Maybe the hump helps the roof to shed water.

I also remembered talking to some good old trailer-dwelling dude in Quartzsite, Arizona. He claimed the best way to patch the roof of an old trailer so it won't leak is not to patch it. He said, "Throw a tarp over the trailer instead and hold it down with pallets and old tires." That's what I did — covered the sleeping hogan with a tarp, pallets and tires — and that's the reason it doesn't leak. Of course, because of sun-induced shredding, the tarp had to be replaced every year or so.

The interior of the hogan has never flooded, because I keep scratching a couple of shallow trenches to divert water away from the compound. Sure, the final result sort of resembles the Our Gang clubhouse, but it's dry, wind-proof, and paid for.

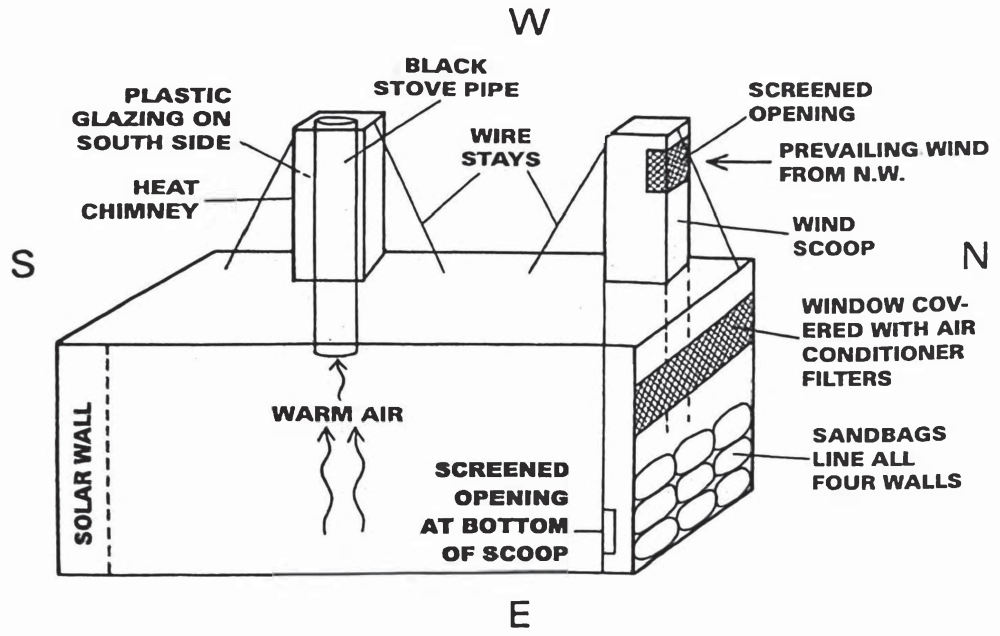


Overview of the hogan. The roof is held down with pallets and tires.

Interior Details

What about amenities? Here are the interior appointments: a four-by-eight plywood bunk for the scrounged mattress; some shelves; a table for the TV; the 12-volt terminal board which hooks up to the marine batteries on the floorboard of the Geo; a little bureau I picked up for fifty cents at a garage sale; and a homemade evap swamp cooler that helps a little. That's pretty much it for the hogan's furnishings along with a couple of electric lights. There is an exhaust fan that blows

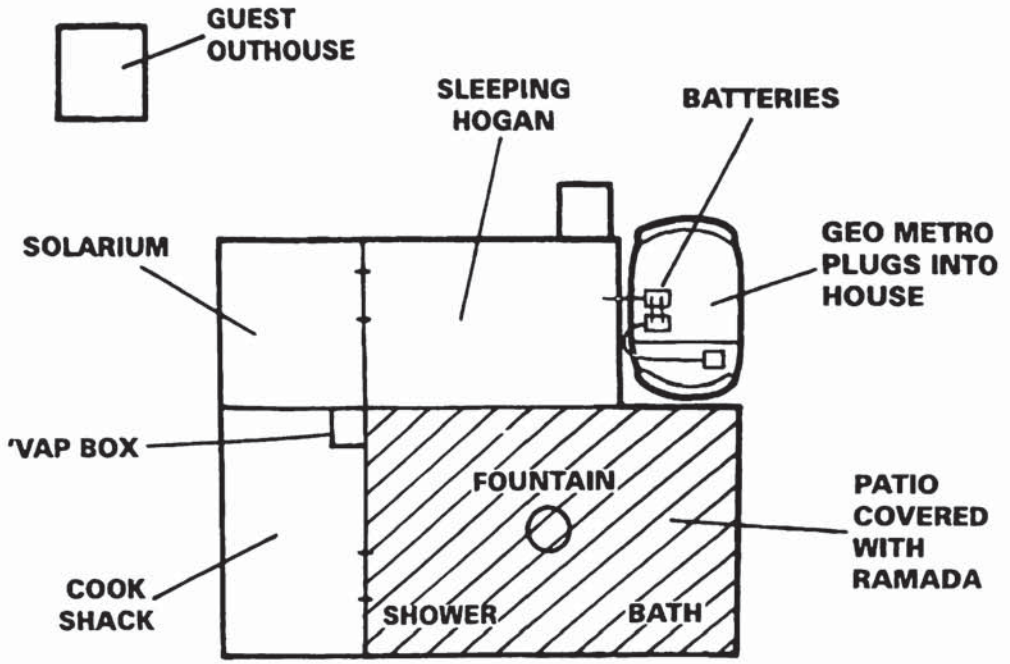
the ceiling air outside on still days and another fan aimed at the bed. Although the fans help, I have to say the main cooling effect inside the sleeping hogan comes from the clerestory-type windows at the top of the north and south walls. It's the natural breeze blowing through the hogan that keeps it cool. I've put strips of air conditioning filter over the north facing window to cut down on the dust.



Spare furnishings, I admit. But I travel a lot and am gone for long periods, and sometimes yahoo vandals from the city are out in the valley on their quads. There's no need to have a lot of stuff in the hogan, and certainly nothing valuable that it would hurt my feelings to lose.

Stuck in the west wall is the homemade evap swamp cooler. This is based on one I saw at the Tukes' place, but it doesn't work nearly as well. That's because all I have is a puny little 12-volt car fan from Kmart. The Tukes use powerful radiator fans scrounged from trucks.

On windless days, another puny fan set in the south clerestory fitfully exhales warm air outside, and it's better than nothing. The heat chimney goes on the roof on the south, the wind scoop on the north (both were brushed aside in a summer wind storm). The one door in the hogan leads out to the cook shed and the fountain in the surrounding *ramada*-covered compound. The main door to the compound is merely a piece of extra-thick, three-layer *crapboard,* three-by-five in size. The hinges I pick up with some other hardware at a garage sale. The two clerestory windows in the sleeping box, on the north and south sides, run the length of the wall at the top, six feet by about 16 inches. A hinged pine board drops down from the ceiling to close them. On the outside, some salvaged fiberglass screening keeps out the bugs.



Kitchen. The cook shed is an un-insulated, un-sandbagged enclosure with glass-less but screened windows. It has the same kind of frame as the hogan: hollow cedar posts (unfilled, though). I place some upright pallets in the walls for solidity instead of sandbags, and sheath the whole thing with scrap plywood.

It's got a long trestle table and a couple of garage sale chairs. A 100-gallon water tank is in here, as well as the 'vap box, a burlap-covered evaporative beer cooling box. Cooking gear and foodstuffs are stored in plastic bins with tight-fitting lids to keep nosy mice out. The stove is one-burner, and runs on propane.

Off the kitchen, of course, is the walled compound covered by a shade-giving slatted *ramada*. This is where the carefree leisured homesteader can lounge around in his hammock or cot, outdoors but protected from sun and wind. Tire pillars anchor the outside corners of the compound, and the eight-foot-high walls are crapboard on the outside.

"Well, Phil," you're gonna say, "this sounds like a very... *humble* sort of dwelling." That's right. Once it was up, though, I felt a lot better. I had a deed to my land and a house on it. My immediate housing problem was solved. I had a place to go, and some freedom and leisure besides. I could kind of look at myself as a pioneer homesteader. They did it; so did I.

Crapboard

Crapboard? Do you have a patent on that?

The Rancho is not simply a place to hang the sombrero, but a scientific laboratory in which experiments, social and physical, are always afoot. Much of the mental exertion in this laboratory takes place in a shade-dappled hammock, since the main experimenter finds that his experiments usually need a lot of thinking about before he gingerly extends a tentative, testing toe into the bath water. *But the results!* One of the major innovations of the dirt cheap homestead, one that I take particular pride in, is the crapboard panel.

Have you been to the building supply store lately? Have you seen what they want these days for a standard four-by-eight sheet of plywood? That kind of pricing flies in the eye of all that "dirt cheap" connotes. Thus I have developed the notion of "crapboard" to replace the store-bought plywood panel, which is so useful for sheathing walls and roofs.

I could easily call it "scrap board," since that's really the idea. I take scraps of plywood that I find here and there and glue them together in a double or triple layer to make the standard sized four by eight sheet. So simple, but so ingenious. I really don't worry too much if the crapboard has large gaps on one side or the other, or whether the scraps I use are of the same width. Quarter inch, half inch, three-eighths — I don't care. This is sheathing, the undercoat, and it doesn't have to be pretty.

I set up a jig on a table. This is just some nailed-down boards that form the perimeter of the four by eight panel. Inside the boards, I arrange the first layer of scraps in a way that I get square corners. On this first layer, I try to have the widths match as much as possible, without being a fanatic about it. I then glue another layer of plywood scraps on top. Because I got a deal at a garage sale on tubes of a generic Liquid Nails, I use that, but pretty much any kind of wood glue works for this purpose as long as it's cheap. The next day, I have a crapboard four-by-eight wall panel pretty much for free.

Now anytime I see a scrap of plywood lying around, I lay hands on it, put it aside until I have enough, and then glue together another crapboard panel.

Cooling & Shade

The undercover desert homesteader.

The Demented Vet spends most of his time sitting in the shade under a flapping awning while he hones his political theories. The Tuke family watches a lot of TV indoors, and they stay refreshed with puffs of cool air coming from homemade swamp coolers. It's subjective, but personally I prefer to sit outside in the shade on a warm day rather than indoors with a swamp cooler, even at the Tukes' place, where the ingenious son and dad have cobbled together (out of auto parts) swamp coolers that actually deliver a steady volume of cool air. The one I made oozed a thin ribbon of damp chill in the sleeping hut. It's far more pleasant on a warm afternoon to lie on the cot by the tinkling fountain under the shade *ramada*.

Chief Ozzie, the retired Navy petty officer homesteading on ten acres north of Blythe, uses misters under his *ramada*, just like at the mall in Phoenix. He uses a garden hose, a 12-volt pump and water from a rooftop cistern. Ozzie tried making his own mister nozzles, but the local water

clogged them. Now he buys the misters at Ace Hardware. For the dirt cheap homesteader, they are kind of expensive at $20 each (and he also rigs them under his trailer for the dogs), but the chief says the misters make the summer months bearable for him.

In any case, no matter the cooling arrangements, the desert homestead needs shade, and the homesteader has to provide his own. Some desert venues, like around the Tukes' Martian homestead, have absolutely nothing growing and not a shade tree for miles. The terrain at the Rancho, however, salty as it is, grows some vegetation: Palo Verde, cactus, ironwood (I think), and the Smoke Tree, the valley's namesake. It's unwise, though, in my humble opinion, to count much on the natural shrubbery for shade because of the potential for conflict with insect life.

Often in spring, millions of bees thrum in the brush. In the insect lottery, some insect species always comes up the winner, their populations exploding with the spring warm-up, and this time the bees won. Although the bees usually don't sting when out foraging (saving their venom for a perceived threat to the hive), one still doesn't want to get into a territorial dispute with thousands of winged devils. Don't do it with any other desert arthropods either, be it wasp or ant. For that reason, it's better, I think, to site the desert homestead in the middle of open ground, and then make shade for it

During the early days at the Rancho, when the land was being put to its highest use as a skeet shooting range, the visitors tried setting up several of those canopies supported by spindly plastic pipes, the sort that can be purchased at a big box department store. The wind thrashed them. The wind shook them out, twisted them like a wet towel, and whirled them away. Dust devils roared through like giant Mixmasters and churned up the awnings we'd attached to aluminum poles. My friend Gordon tried to glue together lengths of plastic irrigation pipe to make a credible framework for awnings. (The broken skeleton of this experiment can still be seen lying in a heap.) Finally, a couple of the gunmen built an 18′ by 12′ shade shack out of studs and panels. A boxcar wind punched that over on its roof.

The Ramada. The answer for shade was the sturdy *ramada:* a slotted roof that throws a patch of shade but lets the heated air rise and escape. In Indian times, the *ramada* was no more than some posts and cross poles covered with brush that provided quick shade and was easy to reinstall if the wind got it. The Mexican colonialists built *ramadas* meant to last. Cross beams rested on adobe columns, and they tied polished branches across the beams that filtered the sun but offered no resistance to wind or to the thermal uplift of heated air.

The rancho sleeping hogan has awnings on the west wall that throw shade over a nook for the morning coffee. I built a sturdy framework of tire pillars. When I'm in residence, I affix a canvas tarp using a method I've seen on cruising sailboats. Three sides of the tarp are secured with bungees. To the grommet on the fourth side, I attach a line that has a gallon jug of water tied to the other end. The gallon of water (six pounds) is enough to keep the awning taut during the usual zephyrs. But if the wind pipes up in the afternoon, it's light enough to lift off the ground, thus easing pressure and sparing the tarp from being flayed to ribbons. I also use another sailing trick: the line is tied to the ear grommet with a slip knot, so if a boxcar springs up, I can quickly release the tarp and let it flog.

On the south side is the solarium. The plastic sheeting didn't survive the summer's windstorms, and the solarium now awaits the arrival of some salvaged glass window panels I found. On the east side is a small courtyard covered with a *ramada* that is part latticework, part trellis, made of thin plywood strips held down by pallets. This shady courtyard, with its hammock and evaporative cooling fountain, is the principle refuge from the noon blaze. But we also need shade

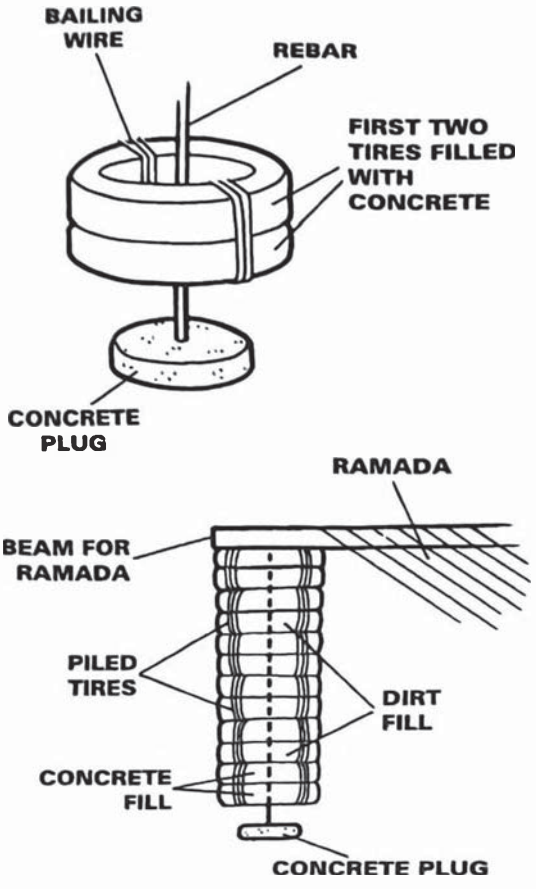
over the *al fresco* workshop when the Geo is getting an oil change or some other bit of minor tool effort is in hand.

My own invention is the shade box — basically, a picnic table with a *ramada*. It's just four eight-foot-long four-by-fours salvaged (from the vandalized outhouse) that frame the table, benches, and overhead trellis. I attach temporary plastic tarps (one ear attached to a gallon jug), and shorten the sail if the wind pipes up.

Since lumber is always hard to come by out here, I've made shade pillars out of some of the old tires scattered around the desert. This is a little labor intensive for my taste, but I'm making use of found rubber from a secret cache (or dump) near Indian Phil's place. First I drive a piece of rebar, if I have it, or a stake studded with old nails, into a shallow hole. I throw a tire over the stake and tie it to the stake with bailing wire (miles of this stuff on the old homesteads). Then I pour in a couple of gallons of concrete to anchor the stake and the first tire to the ground. I then pile on more tires, tying them together, with bailing wire. After I have six or seven wired together, I start filling in the center with dirt and gravel. I continue piling on more tires, wiring them together and filling in with dirt, until I've raised the pillar to about seven feet (no sense going any higher than that). Now for shade, I can tie four tire pillars together with cross beams and either stretch an awning or thatch it with pallets or whatever *ramada* material comes to hand.

I get some of my tarps and awnings from garage sales, and some from across the river at the big swap meet at Quartzsite, Arizona. An eight-by-ten blue plastic tarp with grommets is mine for a couple of bucks. Out in the open, these last about six months before the ultra-violet shreds them. But more expensive silver covers, like the ones the farmers use to cover their hay stacks, will last a year even in direct sunlight. I tried to extend the life of cheap tarps by swabbing them down with a mixture of sand and cement. Didn't work. I also tried painting the plastic panels with salvaged paint, but the paint flakes off after awhile and makes a big mess. I've also made awnings out of used canvas drop cloths, all splattered with paint and very colorful. They hold up for six months or so until they eventually disintegrate in the sun. When I leave the homestead for my travels, I take down all the tarps and awnings and store them in an old plastic garbage can.

Once a spacious shade *ramada* is up (and I think it really should be the first project, even before the sleeping hogan) and one is able to sit in the breeze beneath its umber coolness, then the prospect of a desert homestead seems a lot more realistic. It's just in the first few days, with the unremitting sun blaring down on the superheated ground, that one's resolve trembles, and one thinks, "What the hell am I doing?" With shade, hammock, beverage, and breeze, it starts to make more sense.



Hippie Jim

I met Hippie Jim down in Baja years ago, when my son was about ten and I took him to San Felipe to go fishing. I also wanted to show my son the tide pools and hot springs in Puertocitos another 50 miles south, but in those days, the road past San Felipe turned to ruts and ravines, and I didn't want to risk my car. While standing under the fronds of a souvenir shop, I spotted a burly Yank next to a four-wheel drive station wagon with a USMC decal on the bumper. I struck up a talk, and it turned out he was a retired jarhead living on his military pension in little Puertocitos. My son and I were welcome to hitch a ride.

We couldn't stay at his house because of his on-going big argument with his wife. He loved Baja; she hated it, and wanted, *ahorito*, to shake the dust of the fly-blown little ville of Puertocitos from her sneakers. She was tired of fish tacos; she was tired of Mexicans; and she was tired of her husband using the living room as a flop house for every down-at-the-heels wanderer he

ran across in town. "Lodging isn't a problem," the former Marine says, "because there's Hippie Jim's place."

Hippie Jim always had room, and spur-of-the-moment guests were always welcome. The Marine drove us out to a headland outside the village and dropped us off in front of a tiny trailer perched on the bluff. Jim was home and pointed out the accommodations: a spavined king-sized bed set *al fresco* on the bluff overlooking the Sea of Cortez. At first glance, I could see that Jim was a minimalist. Maybe thirty with long hair and beard to the navel, he said he'd once been an Altadena cop who came to realize that enforcement wasn't for him. He'd drifted down to Baja, became penniless, and wound up working at a fish camp not far from his present abode. When the sweltering summer arrived, the Mexican fisherman left him in charge of the camp while they drove the ice truck to the wholesaler. They'd said they'd be back to replenish supplies, but the weeks dragged by and nobody showed. Jim was on his own. So he became a beachcomber, a scavenger, and a forager.

Eventually, somebody gave him the beat-up little trailer, and being handy with circuits, he made a few pesos for the tortilla fund by handling basic electricity for the ville. Sometimes he did some guide work for one of the Mexican charter operators. Mostly, he lived off the tide pools.

In the morning, having nothing to eat ourselves, my son and I went foraging in the tide pools with Jim. His foraging tool of choice was an old golf club with one end sharpened. He either clubbed it or he stabbed it, but in half an hour he collected a bucket of mollusks and pulpy young octopus. Kindling a fire on the beach, he cooked the whole mess up in seawater right in the bucket. My son developed a taste for calamari right there. Breakfast was rounded off with a few corn tortillas warmed on a couple of sticks.

Anyway, a few more years rolled by and I ran into Jim again at the Rainbow Festival, being held that year in Modoc County in the Warner Mountains. For those that don't know, the festival is a gathering of hippie tribes from all over the world, held annually at different locations. Basically, it's a big, colorful campout with lots of Sixties rhetoric, lots of hallucinogens, and no cash allowed, barter only. A photographer and I were there for *California Magazine*, and once again my son came along. Just before starting up the mountain, I'd bought some stuff to use in the trading circle. I'd heard the most valuable items were packs of Camels and Snicker Bars frozen in Styrofoam cups of ice. I gave some of the goods to my 13-year-old son to trade, but it turned out to be a Jack-in-the-Beanstalk experience for him. He came back from the circle with a bunch of script that some hippie sharper claimed would work in the automatic coin machines at laundromats.

Hippie Jim's Cardboard House. Hippie Jim now lived in a little hamlet in Northern California in a house in the woods made out of waxed cardboard. He still made a few bucks doing odd jobs as an electrician, and since he lived rent free and had few wants, he blew off the spare cash every summer by vacationing in Europe. Wasn't it too wet up north to live in a cardboard house, even if made from produce boxes? You'd think, but in fact, Jim said, it'd worked out pretty good.

He'd framed the cabin with old two-by-fours and then sheathed the outside with strips of wax-impregnated cardboard cut from fruit boxes. When he ran out of fruit boxes, he melted down a bunch of half-used candles purchased at a thrift store and painted a coat of wax over regular cardboard panels. I said it sounded like his house *was* a candle. Well, the deep mossy redwood grove where he lived tended to be cool and damp year around. And you needed to be careful with fire anyway. Then he'd told me about some other experiments with cardboard that I later tried myself when I became a desert homesteader.

"The trouble with cardboard sheathing," Jim said, "is that it's wimpy, just couldn't take much of a punch. Not solid. Buckles easily." He wanted thicker wall sheathing. Jim had been taking advantage every week of the free commodities offered to the indigent in his little hamlet, but he'd grabbed more of the free flour than he could ever use making biscuits and flapjacks. He mixed a pot of glue out of flour and water and used it as a paste to glue together pieces of cardboard. He found that, if he glued together four or five layers of cardboard, he had a pretty solid panel. Then he painted candle wax all over the layered panel, and set it outside during a rainstorm to see how it held up. It worked good: the panel didn't turn to mush, kept its shape, and was pretty strong. But he never used any of the pasted panels on his shack because, basically, it was a lot of trouble, and he planned to move pretty soon anyway.

Another idea he had that he'd never tried involved a means to flameproof the cardboard house. The scheme came to him during a forest fire in the region. He'd signed on as a temporary firefighter, and during a break he'd been watching planes drop fire retardant on the blaze. In general parlance, these planes are called "borax bombers." "*Borax,*" said Hippie Jim to himself, "Coat the cardboard panels with borax. Mix it with the wax." But he never tried it, and I haven't put it to the test yet out at the Rancho. Try it at your own risk.

Building Cardboard Walls

Cardboard intrigues the dirt cheap homesteader because you can buy a 100-pound bale for seventy-five cents at the recycler. That's a good price for potential building material.

My inspiration at the Rancho was to soak the cardboard panels in a solution of cement and water. I tried putting in a little sand for texture. My idea was to use the first batch of cardboard/cement panels as the interior wall paneling for the cook shack. This was a dismal, embarrassing failure.

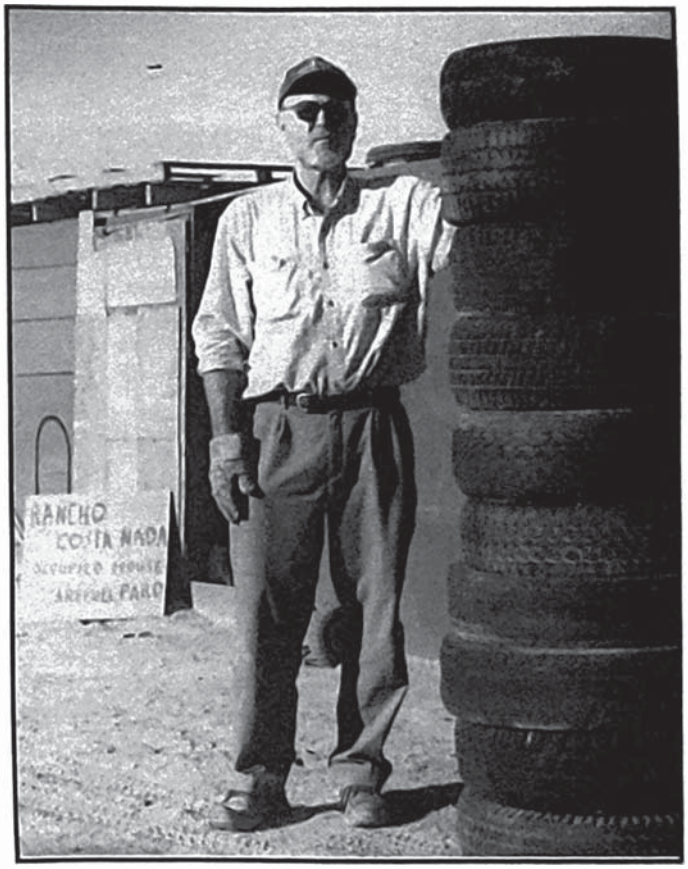
First, all cardboard is not equal. Samland makes first class strong cardboard. Asian cardboard, on the other hand, comes from paper fibers that have been recycled a hundred times. It's tissue paper and dissolves with the first drop of water. What that means is when you break open the 100-pound bale of cardboard, you have to separate American from Asian. Second, while American cardboard easily takes a coat of wax, it doesn't easily soak up cement. Seems like it ought to, but it doesn't. All my efforts to beef up cardboard in cement soup failed.

I usually would have given up, but I didn't. While building the compound, I tried an exterior wall made of three layers of cardboard pasted together with generic Liquid Nails and then coated in wax from half-burned candles from the thrift shop. I nailed that up and slapped on a coat of white paint (free from a garage sale). So far, after a couple of ferocious windstorms, this has held up. But before I nailed on the triple-ply waxed panels, I tried to set one on fire with a butane stove lighter. It burned like, well, a candle. What I oughta do is take a hint from Hippie Jim and mix borax and cayenne pepper into the next batch of wax. The borax might make the panel fire-resistant, and the pepper would deter insects. One of these days.

The astute student will see that I've pioneered yet another means to make the dirt cheap homestead even cheaper. The basic sleeping hogan could have been sheathed with wax-impregnated cardboard (if I'd failed to find a cheap source of scrap plywood). I would have put horizontal slats of scrap lumber from pallets along the courses of sandbags to hold them in place, then tacked on waxed cardboard sheathing. Maybe you'd better see if the borax works before you try this.

The cardboard might also be used for wall insulation. Of course, you can't just stick cardboard inside the wall. It'll get moldy or become a bee hotel. I think I'd try making insulation panel by stapling together four or five layers of cardboard. Then add a thin sheet of visqueen pasted on both sides with whatever crap glue you have. Make certain the edges of the cardboard are covered too. I didn't do this for the hogan roof insulation because I'd already gone to the trouble of stripping regular insulation batts out of an old trailer.

With a hollow post and beam shell and maybe a combination of cardboard and crapboard sheathing, the low-end dead broke dirt cheap homesteader could put up a chump-change hovel in a couple of days (if he skipped the sandbags). Okay, eventually a major boxcar might delaminate it somewhat, but in the meantime, it could be shelter for the price of a fancy meal.



The author in front of the completed hogan. Tire pillars were used to hold up a shade ramada in front of the dwelling. Note crapboard door in background. On the sign the word "careful" is misspelled on purpose to give additional weight to the implied warning by conjuring up a vision of an unlettered and possibly demented property owner.

Chapter Eight
Trailers

I have built a sandbag-based hogan, but most dirt cheap desert homesteads out here start out with the junk trailer. It's the easiest way. No matter what kinda dwelling may come later, pulling a trailer onto the property gives the homesteader instant abode.

Now these days, millions of Good Sams, mostly geezers, spend semi-nomadic summers cruising the freeways in fancy aluminum. And in winter, in places like Quartzsite, Arizona, or Algodones, California, the snowbirds begin to flock starting about October; by Christmas, hundreds of thousands of units are laagered in the desert in sprawling campgrounds and in long-term visitor's areas on BLM land. The rigs are of all descriptions, from million dollar alum (with 5000 kw generators, slide out bedrooms, and sat dishes), devolving all the way down to the converted Blue Bird with the Dead decals. Re: desert homestead, I am not talking about these rigs.

Trailer Homesteads

The dirt cheap desert homesteader usually finds some disabled piece of 20-year-old junk that he picks up for a few hundred bucks. He somehow pumps up the tires and hauls it out to the site, from which it will never budge again. Typically, the homesteader will gut the interior with a pry bar to make more room. That overhead berth in front goes to make more standing headroom. The closet space that conceals the ducts for the propane heater? He does away with it, to make a wider central aisle. It's cheaper to heat with rotund, reliable Mr. Heater anyway than with the bulky unit that's standard issue with the travel trailer.

The Tukes family pretty much is typical of the desert homesteaders when it comes to trailers. Their property is on a barren hillside, more Mars-scape than moonscape since the rock is a tawny red. In what amounted to a year-long Herculean task, the Tukes boys have engineered a serpentine road leading up to their laager. The main house is made of three old patched-up trailers shoved together. One of the trailers is devoted strictly to their aviary, an eclectic roost of doves and pigeons and various songbirds presided over by a big-beaked Macaw. Domestic fowl live in the compound too, behind the house. (Snakes like the Tukes place. Seem to be able to smell the eggs.)

The interior of the Tuke homestead, three trailers pushed together.

Some desert trailer dwellers, like the gang-tatted biker meth cookers, don't seem to do much to customize their homes. This observation is based solely on looking over the cookers' premises following a sheriff's raid; I tag along as a newspaper reporter when the occupants, decamped or handcuffed in the back of a squad car, aren't available to share their thoughts on the *feng shui* of meth trailers.

One of the Hobo's trailers. The boxcar winds not only topple trailers, but also blow out the sides. To prevent that, the Hobo sets steel studs along the outside walls.

Sheet metal awnings for sun and wind protection.

To prevent his trailers from being tipped over by ferocious boxcar winds, the Hobo ties them down with airplane cable attached to metal fence posts driven at an angle four feet into the ground and set in concrete. The cables go over the top of the trailer and also are attached to the frame. Behind him is one of the metal studs pressing in the sides of the trailer. He removes the trailer wheels to discourage rustlers.

Adapting to the Desert. Most of the other desert trailers I've seen, though, have been retrofitted to make them more suitable to the desert climate. First of all, the typical cheap lightly constructed travel trailer is too flimsy to withstand the boxcar winds that rampage through the Smoke Tree Valley. One weekender up on the hill about five miles from me came out one Saturday to find that the previous day's wind storm had demolished his two trailers — kayoed 'em, stomped 'em flat like a cornflakes box.

Overview of the Hobo's homestead. The larger building in the background is actually a truck trailer he uses for storage and as an office.

What the Hobo does is anchor his above-ground trailers with steel airplane cable. The cable, thrown across the top of the trailer, is tightened down by turn screws to fence stakes pounded four feet into the ground. It's also important, of course, to have the skinny end of the trailer pointed into the prevailing wind. Other guys, like my old high school pal Wolf, beef up the trailer inside with studs to keep the flimsy walls from collapsing.

Insulation. Another thing about the cheap travel trailer is that it's poorly insulated. Sometimes the wall studs are matchstick one-by-twos, and the insulation batts are pretty skimpy. It's awful to deal with fiberglass insulation, but some like Wolf have found it worthwhile to pull off the interior wall panels, beef up the wall studs to two-by-fours, and then install fatter batts. I think an even better idea would be to take a pointer from a trailer I visited across the river in Arizona: the guy had not only beefed up the interior batts but had added a false roof under which he stuffed a thick layer of loose insulation.

Henry the Buckaroo has some other ideas for insulating trailers. Henry lives in a 16-foot travel trailer about ten miles outside of Blythe on land that reputedly is owned by Pappy, an elderly fellow who lives in town and who has a beef with the BLM rangers.

Many years before, Pappy had let some people keep their trailers on his property (which abuts BLM land). Apparently, the ranger gave Pappy a hard time about some mess that had accumulated. Eventually, the beef went to court and the codger won. Property rights trumped in Samland.

But Pappy is still so pissed at BLM that now he lets anybody, ANYBODY, park a trailer on his property for the grand rental sum of nothing. Great deal for those on a limited income. Sadly, this has attracted a few real Drainbows who aren't very tidy. Add some ex-cons and some people whose immigration papers may not be in perfect order. But there are also plenty of good old boys like the Buckaroo.

Growing up on a ranch near Winnemucca, Nevada, Henry followed the buckaroo life until he got too beat up. He then spent twenty years as a sheep herder, living like a Basque in a tiny van and using his rifle to fend off predators, which were mostly domestic dogs from town.

Now he lives entirely on the pittance he gets from Social Security in the desert, winter and summer, in his little trailer. Henry doesn't bother with awnings for shade. The wind rips them to rags anyway. He just moves his chair from one side of the trailer to the other as the sun makes its orbit.

In winter, Henry insulates his trailer with wool army blankets pinned up to the walls and ceiling. Piled around his bunk are laundry bags filled with clothes to help take the bite out of a desert winter. In summer, he pretty much toughs it out. Without some kind of mechanical cooling, a tuna tin is a torture chamber something like the one in "The Bridge on the River Kwai." Typical Blythe temperatures in July are 110 daytime, 90 at night.

Cooling Trailers. The Tukes and J.R. get through the summer temps using swamp coolers they've built themselves. Evaporative coolers have the advantage (over air conditioning) of being extremely simple in principle. Water drips on porous mats. The water evaporates, chilling the surrounding air; a fan blows the cool air into the house. Most of the Tukes' evap coolers are made from car parts: radiators, water pumps, 12-volt fans and tubing. The mats cost a few dollars at Kmart.

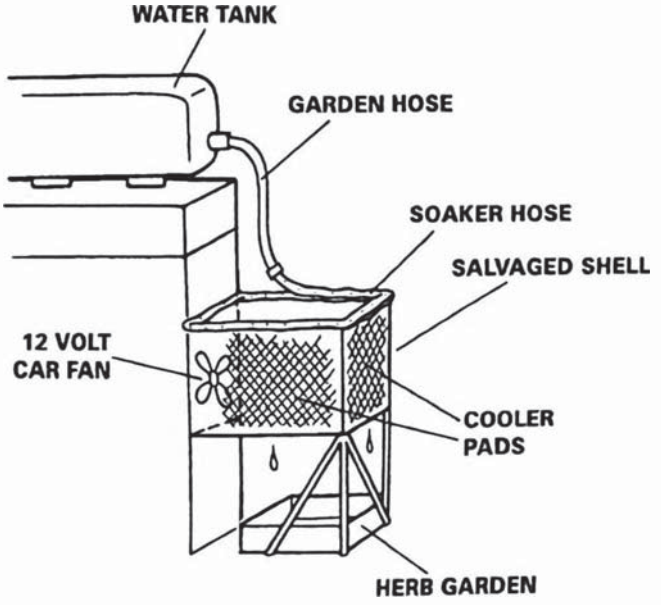
Boy Tuke with one of the homemade swamp coolers. This one uses a 15-amp truck fan. On a summer scorcher, the cooler uses 20 gallons of water per day. The cooler, TV, and other electrical devices run off solar panels, but the Tukes don't complicate their system with batteries, diodes or regulators. The sunshine runs directly from the panels into the machines. When the sun goes down, they fire up a gasoline generator.

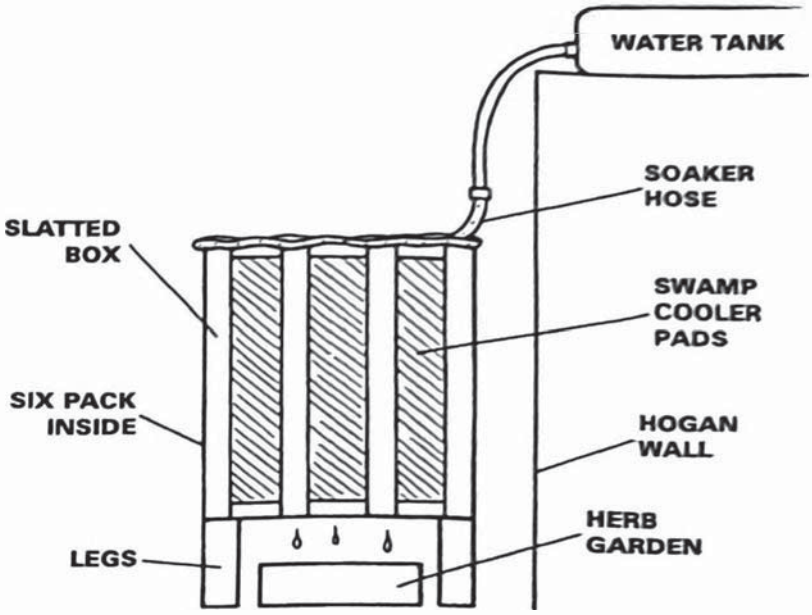
I made my rather ineffective swamp cooler for the hogan out of a cooler shell I found out in the desert. I pinned the mats around the inside. But instead of using car parts, I used a soaker hose I got at a garage sale. I just clamped the hose in place at the top of the mats. The water was gravity fed into the hose from a tank on the roof.

In most swamp coolers, the water collects in a pan underneath the unit and then is re-circulated by an electric pump, but not in my design. The water oozes out so slowly from the soaker hose that 90 percent of it evaporates. I've set an alleged garden box under the unit to catch the remainder, and one of these days I may plant something in it.

The blower is just a small 12-volt fan that runs off a dedicated battery recharged by a small solar panel. I need a bigger fan.

Chief Ozzie, a retired Navy petty officer who lives on 10 acres north of Blythe, prefers misters to swamp coolers, but he pretty much lives outside all summer on a screened porch.





Tents

The only cheaper alternative to the junk trailer is the tent. I hinted earlier that the boxcar winds in the desert kind of preclude long-term tenting. Some people try it anyway, if they can sew, by reinforcing the seams of the tent, flattening the roof, Bedouin-style, and by using thick vertical interior poles.

The only *long-term* tenter I've seen around here is the camp host at one of the BLM's visitors' areas. Plain Jane is a plump and cheery middle-aged woman who came to the desert to solve her urban woes. She's a stereotypical sad story.

If Jane ever had looks, she lost 'em along with her waist. Her guy dumped her and ran off with a cutie pie. She had a dreary office job for twenty years before the new management canned her. She couldn't pay her rent and got the eviction notice. So one rainy day, sitting at the kitchen table picking at a TV dinner, she said to herself, "I wonder if I could live in a tent?"

She went out into the desert to a BLM campground and set up her Kmart tent and her brand new Coleman stove. Turned out, this wasn't really a problem, but in fact was easy and a big relief. The yoke was off for the first time in her life. Then she found out she could be campground host: live completely rent free and collect a little stipend.

She is now a stolid, good-natured problem solver for the sunset sojourners in alum boxes. She's retrofitted her cheap tent, however, to make it more Bedouin-like, flattening it out and installing interior poles to beef up the exterior frame.

Both Plain Jane and Henry are solitary. Jane says she keeps busy helping the other campers. Henry says he never gets lonely all by himself out in the desert in a 16-foot trailer. He says he got accustomed to solitude during the sheep herding days, and now prefers it. I think that's the kind of attitude you need to follow Henry's severe path.

Now let's take a closer look at how Wolf handled the trailer situation.

Wolf's Story

What a long, strange trip it's been for Wolf.

I've known Wolf since high school. We met on the crip bench in gym during senior year. I'd had a couple of papaloma warts removed from my foot. Wolf had broken his leg in a motorcycle crash. Wolf confided to me his goal in life after graduation was to be run over by a rich lady and win a settlement. A few months later, he got one of the sophomores pregnant. When the dad surprised them in the girl's second-story bedroom, Wolf jumped out the window and broke his leg again.

He married the girl but didn't hang around long. Out one night for a drunken Sunday drive at the wheel of his turd Studebaker, he ran over a pedestrian on the sidewalk and kept going. But a witness copied his tag, a judge issued a warrant, and Wolf disappeared. Word had it he was working the lighters on the Great Lakes. A few years drifted by and his wife and daughter had settled in with somebody else — in fact, one of Wolf's old pals.

One dark night, Wolf blows back into town. He's drinking at the Pink Ostrich, a place where we all used to hang out as teenagers because the bartenders didn't practice age discrimination. He hears his wife's been unfaithful, vows revenge (as would any deceived husband) and goes right over to the old pal's apartment.

Wolf isn't the kind of guy who needs an invitation or a key. Jimmying the window, he's inside with his rifle. First he fires into the wall, but, despite the loud report, nobody wakes up. The wife and pal are sleeping in the bedroom, his little daughter on the couch. Wolf fires through the bedroom door. Happily, the young couple can't afford a bed and are sleeping on a mattress on the floor. The bullet goes over them and into the adjoining (luckily vacant) apartment. Wolf slams into the bedroom, and a huge row ensues until somehow his wife manages to get the rifle. Disarmed and cheated of blood, Wolf leaves and disappears from the visible world again.

Next time I see Wolf, he's living with a bunch of guys in a party house up in the hills. They've trashed the rental. The walls are painted purple and black, the toilets are overflowing, and motorcycles are dismantled on the kitchen table. There's lots of booze, dope, and very young girls.

The night I stopped by, a pissed-off crowd lifted a nervous young man onto the hood of a car and put a noose around his neck. It had to do with bad credit, I think, but they spared him. The next week the landlord happened to visit, was understandably appalled, and evicted the tenants. They had one more party (I didn't get the invitation) and afterwards they torched the house. Wolf's name was on the lease, so he disappeared again.

Somewhere along his escape route, Wolf had the epiphany that spun him 180 degrees. He sort of woke up one night, standing shitfaced by his girlfriend's bullet-riddled car with a pistol in his hand. At that moment, he came to, preternaturally sober, and said to himself, "*This can't go on.*" He went to Alaska, did the "My name is Wolf" twelve step, got a job in construction, and pretty much straightened out. Eventually, with the money he earned, he came back to the Lower 48 and bought land in the desert. Now, with his Japanese bride, he was a homesteader, of sorts.

Wolf's House. Wolf's desert compound on the Arizona side of the Colorado doesn't exactly qualify as a dirt cheap homestead on two heads. First, while he's been thrifty and budget-conscious, he throws more money at his dwelling than is the case at the Rancho. Rather than scouring junk yards and garage sales, he buys quality at the store. And he favors a more conventional lifestyle with conveniences such as refrigeration and lots of generator power for tools and appliances. Esthetics and quality count for more in Wolf's equation than mere thrift.

Secondly, Wolf wasn't incompetent. Even when he was under the thrall of the grape and breaking into houses rather than building them, he came across few doors or windows that he couldn't jimmy with a deft pry bar. He excelled at keyless opening of locks and had a nice set of picks to accompany his burglar tools.

After doing the Al-Anon Twelve Step, he eschewed crime and went into construction in Alaska, both framing and finishing new houses. Being handy, he did well, kind of like the youngest James brother (who made a lot more money honestly in real estate than he ever did as a crook). Wolf came to the desert with more skills and experience (and money in his bank account) than the average impecunious urban waif or refugee making his escape from responsibility.

Still, the guiding principles that inspire his compound are worth pondering. Wolf says he will never pull a permit again. This means that his dwellings are all, ostensibly, trailers on wheels, and viewed bureaucratically as vehicles rather than as buildings. He buys cheap, distressed and usually ancient park model trailers, guts them completely, and rebuilds them inside top to bottom. The trailer is merely the shell that qualifies his house as a vehicular non-building. Jack stands or cement piers actually support the trailers. The wheels barely brush the ground and are on the axles solely for appearance, just in case a county inspector ever cruises his remote site.

Wolf's compound is sort of Mexican style. Four trailers form a rectangle with an interior courtyard. As in Mexico, the rooms all open on the courtyard, but don't interconnect. One trailer is a living room, one a bedroom, another a workshop, and the last is the kitchen and dining room.

Another reason Wolf's place didn't truly qualify as dirt cheap was the amount of work he's put in. He ripped out everything inside the trailers until nothing's left but the tin. He pulled out all the old yellowed water spotted insulation. Pulled out the splintered, rotten spindly studs. Pulled out all the fire hazardous aluminum wiring. Got rid of all the faux pine finishing, the claustrophobic bathrooms, the closet panels, the plumbing, the furnace and ducting. Everything got pulled out until nothing was left but an unsupported bread tin. Then, he started over. He framed with straight new smooth studs, stuffed the voids with plenty of new insulation, rewired for DC using fire-proof conduits, and put in new pipes in the kitchen.

The living room has thick varnished roof beams. Instead of fiber wall paneling, the bane of trailer life, Wolf has Gypsum dry wall, neatly taped and painted. He has put in skylights and new window glass. Now he has airy open rooms more like a modern tract house, rather than the cramped, space-miserly fo'csles and narrow passageways of a ship's 'tween decks found in most trailers.

The south side of the living room trailer has a Thrombe wall that intensifies the wan winter sunlight and ducts the warmed air along the floor. A rooftop solar collector made from an old water heater does most of the heating for the hot tub, plus he has two back up water heaters: one propane-fired, the other wood stoked. The hot tub is one of those square polished wood Japanese-style boxes. To combat the summer temps, the Wolf House has shade awnings over all the windows, a store-bought DC evap cooler, and gurgling rock fountains in both living and bed rooms. A trellis with some kind of grape vine growing on it shades most of the patio, and on one side, built against one of the trailers, is a kind of mossy sheet of rock and cement about five feet high that is kept moist by drip lines. All the pumps and fans run off direct current from a bank of

golf cart batteries that are connected to an array of rooftop solar panels cocked toward the westering sun.

This is a *Mother Earth News* house that relies a lot on technology. Wolf shrugs off questions about cost, since it's none of my business, but I can see that the photovoltaic solar panels alone have got to be worth thousands. Those and the $300 batteries and the $3,000 2000 watt generator are out of the price range of the dirt cheap homesteader. Still, we look at it because of the principle that does apply to dirt cheap building: buying a $100 junk trailer, gutting it, and using the shell as a starting point (and as a way to avoid any lingering concern about building permits).

Dirt Cheap Trailers

Gut the junk trailer and it's a *tabula rasa* on which the homesteader can paint his own scene. If the homesteader has a few spare bucks, he could install dry wall directly over the faux pine paneling, daub on some paint, and it wouldn't look much worse than the average Joe College entry level one-bedroom crash pad. Because of my reasonable fear of trailer fire, I'd put the conduit for any wires on the outside of the dry wall, even if that does make the décor sort of like the engine room on a destroyer.

Both the luxury Wolf's house and Phil's proposed economy box would look the same from the road: like junk trailers. Only the interior reveals the character (and, okay, the taste) of the occupant. By the way, one good place to buy junk trailers is Quartzsite, Arizona, in July. Wolf says he finds them by scouting the storage yards at RV resorts. He's looking for something distressed and abandoned that he knows the management wants to unload. Wolf's idea of retrofitting junk trailers doubtless will cry out to the would-be homesteader with a truck to haul his acquisitions to the site.

I've followed some of Wolf's plans for the travel trailer that I park on BLM land through the winter as a *pied-a-terre* closer to the metropolis of Blythe. This is a travel trailer that my brother-in-law gave me. I've gutted the upper berth in the front room. That way, I don't bump my head anymore when I get up from my desk. While removing the berth, I smashed a hole as big as a dinner plate in the wall. Well, that's a good place to hang my certificates and honorary degrees (when I get them). I've taken all the doors off the cabinets, so I can see what's in there without a struggle. In travel trailers, the cabinet doors are always hard to open because of the extra-secure latches meant to keep gear from going adrift while on the highway.

I removed the original bed and water tank from the bedroom to make room for a more comfy futon. The trailer's water tank is now on the roof of the hogan. I bring water to the trailer in five-gallon cans. I read that the average family of four goes through something like 2,300 gallons of water a month. When I'm at the trailer, I use about five gallons a day for bathing and dish washing and another couple of gallons for cooking and drinking. At the Rancho, I can be more profligate because J.R. will deliver 400 gallons every once in awhile, a chemically rich solution that's good enough for washing and a shower.

Anyway, the junk trailer certainly would be the quickest way for the new homesteader, whether ept or inept, to get quick lodging on the land.

Conversations with the Demented Vet, IV

"So Phil. What do you do for ready? Are you on disability? On the dole? Collecting unemployment? Tell me your angle. We're all parasites out here, Phil, and I'm damn glad of it. The parasitic rich and the parasitic poor. We're both sucking the blood out of the same white and waxy body, the salaried sappolas of the middle class. Your wage-earning, W-2-wagging, payroll tax paying American serf with a mortgage. When you get that tract-house mortgage, Phil, you lay yourself right across the government's hip. Now *they have a twist on you where you're gonna come along. Where do ya think* you're *going, sap, with that mortgage wound around your neck like a stinking bird? We* know *where you live.*

"We got you by the short hair for the rest of your tax-paying life, and buddy we're gonna squeeze 'em hard. Have to! *The poor can't pay taxes. The rich won't. The money's got to come from somebody to subsidize the welfare moms and the corporate farmers. It's gotta be out of the sap's W-2. You mark my words. It's like medieval times. The aristocracy didn't pay. The church didn't pay. The vagabond varlets sleeping in a ditch didn't have a pot to piss in, so they didn't pay. All the costs are gonna be pushed onto the salaried peasant in his tract hovel. The saps think buying the house will help on taxes with the mortgage interest deduction?* It's bait. *It's the bait for the snare, and life-long entrapment. It's the chain attached to the stake. It's the skin-pop of heroin that gets you into the game. Then the saps hemorrhage from paper cuts for the rest of their lives. Property taxes. Lighting districts. Water, sewer. Schools for brats you don't even have. They* know *where you are, and what you got, and they got you down on the ground.*

"I don't blame the rich asshole for ducking taxes. I give him the benefit of the doubt. If the tax money went for the spastic school, he'd probably pay. But he can see the money isn't going to the spastic school or to the retards or to fill the potholes. It's going to the fat plutocrat riding next to him in the golf cart. The corporate farmer getting a fat subsidy for growing cotton nobody wants. The oilman getting a depreciation allowance. The logging CEO getting a free ride to cut timber on public land, and then sending the boards to Japan. Why should the rich creep pay that kind of welfare to a guy he pisses on trees with at Bohemian Grove? Let the saps with the tract house mortgage and the W-2 pick up the tab for useless cotton or ethanol.

"Howdy Doody's tax cut? Half of it to the richest one percent by the end of the decade. Who's gonna make up the difference to chase ragheads, beef up the war machine and pay for geezer meds? I tell ya, Phil, it's gonna be full-court terror on the middle class pocketbook.

"Mark my words. After the dirty bomb goes off in DC, Congress will hit Sapland with a 10 percent war-on-terror surtax on earned income up to the first $100,000. That's my prediction. Because the W-2 saps can't hide their dough. The government computer knows how much you make. You can't shield your wages in the Bahamas. You've made yourself a wide-open target for the tax collector. Did you say 401(k)? Don't make me laugh. It's not the Cayman Islands. It's not a tax shelter. First, it's a way for the company to get out of giving the potted plants a pension. Then for most working stiffs there's no tax break with a 401(k). They don't earn enough. And in the end it's still taxed at 20 percent, federal alone. Thirty percent, if you get your ass in a crack

and have to take it out early. It's bait. *It's bait to keep you in the game, so you won't say, hey, I'm bein' screwed out of my pension.*

"And then all the indirect taxation, Phil. Cigarettes. Tax the hell out of them. Seven bucks a pack already in New York. California will be the same. Tax the tobacco addicts. It's good for the country and the Indian nations. Rich people don't smoke cigarettes any more, and us poor varlets roll our own. The Alfred E. Newman tax cut, Phil? The Fed hands out a $300 pittance to the average sap, and the governors are screaming bloody murder. Because the Feds are skimming it off the state's blue check, and the governors gotta make up the difference. Raise the car license fees. Raise the traffic fines. Raise all the permit fees. Shake down the insurance companies and HMOs so they have to raise their premiums. And who gets the ungreased shaft? Rich people don't go to Kaiser. They got their own sawbones. The poor go to the emergency room or the VD clinic. Rich people don't take out term life insurance. They hire lawyers to set up trusts. And the poor aren't even good for the premium. And there's the dumb burgher standing there with his dick in his hand. I'll tell you, Phil, it's sapismo. *The states have no choice but to push all the extra costs for prisons and freeways onto the saps in the middle class.*

"And look at the way the energy moguls bamboozled the state of California. The deregulation fiasco. Aren't you glad you don't pay one dime for utilities? But the saps are in the barrel again. Oh, but I must have my AC. *Look up there. What's that thermometer say? 110? We're sitting in the shade. There's a nice breeze. You don't see me paying Edison $150 a month. But the saps will do it... because they're saps. Well, okay, you ask. What's fair? I say 15 percent would be fair for the saps, to cover infrastructure. Forty percent for the CEO. Soak the bastard. Maybe five percent for the burger flipper at McD's. And I don't pay anything. Except gasoline tax, which I can't help.*

"The rich and the poor have one thing in common, Phil. Parasites on the middle class. Fine. Fine. I'd rather be a blood sucker than a blood donor."

Chapter Nine
Transportation

Trigger, Champion and Silver. The importance of the reliable steed.

Let's chat a moment about the automobile and the desert homestead.

One time, for about a year, I tried to get along without a car. It was an experiment that started when the transmission burned out on the beater of the hour. That's an expensive repair, and the brakes and tires were shot anyway. Insurance premium was due and I had a warrant out for tickets. These were all plenty of good reasons to be fed up with the tyranny of the automobile. Of course being a voluntary pedestrian automatically makes you an enviro-hero for not contributing your mite of soot to the darkening planet.

During the year of boot, bus, and bike, I did save some money and I felt even more virtuous and superior than usual. The experiment fizzled for a couple of reasons. One reason was that I hated riding the bus given the disgusting people you rub elbows with — every fulminating psychopath, every unwashed derelict, every mom with a pack of blubbering urchins, every elderly crone with a hacking wet cough — all picked the vacant seat next to me.

I switched to a bicycle, and nearly killed myself. Riding home from the junior college, I flew over the handlebars and landed on my head. Happily, I had a helmet on; happily, a passing bum pulled my stunned and semi-conscious carcass out of the traffic. (He also neatly stacked the coins that had been knocked out of my pocket by the impact.)

Even so, I pulled three days in the ICU of the physico-cranial-neural ward (or whatever) of the hospital. That experience put me off bike riding in traffic, and I started going afoot in all weathers. I like to walk. It's my favorite recreation. But that hurt the time element. I was trying to hold a job in LA: Hours of hoofing every day couldn't be more inconvenient.

Mainly, I went back to car ownership because I wanted to date. No matter how you gloss it or dress it up in eco-friendly bunting, when you tell a woman, "I don't have a car," it's the death knell for any congenial sentiment on her part. I don't care if she's perma-dyed Green. What kind of guy, in Samland, doesn't have a car? He's got to be carrying a white cane and a leash with a dog on it. I crawled back in the driver's seat, and in the hour of The Great Asphyxiation, my name will be tallied among the long list of culprits.

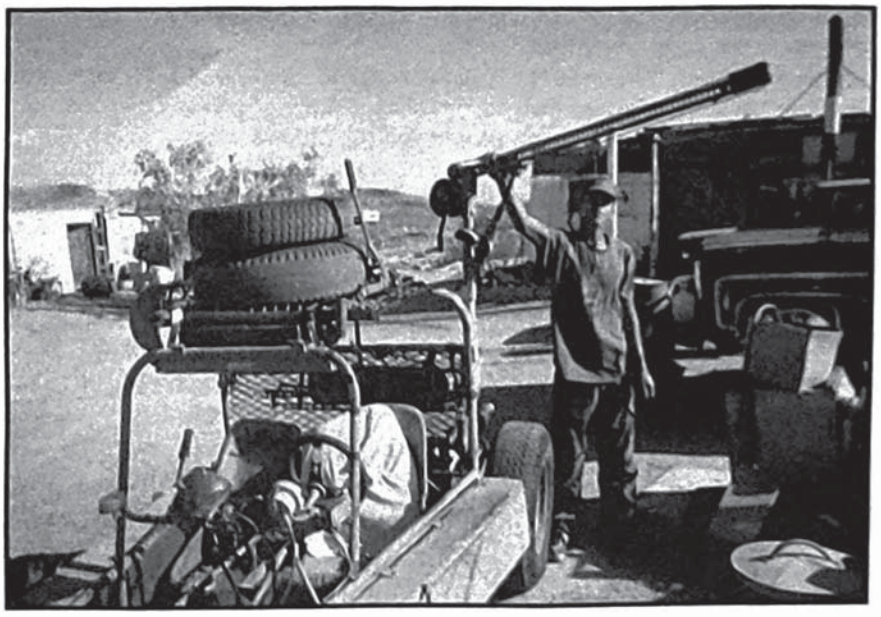
Point is though, pain in the ass such as it was, I managed to get along without a car. Although one consorts far too intimately with the undermensch, the deranged, and the disease-ridden, riding the bus and trolley, even the car-less drone circulate in much-punctuated slow time. In urbia, with constant paranoid vigilance and head armor, the bicyclist can also get to work. Foot travel is

by far the best car-less way to circumnavigate the town if you have the time. But who does, if you have to work? And you need Boy Scout-style preparedness for inclement weather with hat, umbrella, water bottle, and sensible shoes.

Conversely, out on the desert homestead, the reliable internal combustion vehicle is indispensable and mandatory. Some kind of trustworthy wheeled machine is the number one priority after a drink of water. Because the dirt cheap homestead perforce sits on worthless land, it's far from everything. Breaking down can be more than an inconvenience alleviated by a phone call. Even if you can get connected on the cell, Triple-A will not be coming on these roads. Plastic of any kind won't help. Cash could work for repairs or a tow, if the right guy comes by. But will anybody come by?

Desert Vehicles

Most of the homesteaders I know rely on the heavy-bodied pickup truck as the primary vehicle. That's because everything, including water, has to be hauled. For the extended Tukes family and livestock, that's 3,000 pounds of water a week from the spigot in Blythe forty-five miles away. Most of the homesteaders have other vehicles as well, mostly for off-road. They're versions of sand rails or dune buggies, based on the Volkswagen engines and chassis. Just about every desert homestead front yard (save mine) features a collection of spent bugs being gradually picked over for parts.



Boy Tuke with one of his homemade buggies. The hoist allows him, if necessary, to pull the engine and transmission in the field.

Also a favorite out here would be what I call the Safari Car. This would be like a Chevy Suburban with all the doors and windows out, making it open and airy for desert travel without AC. But the shade awning mechanics transform any passenger vehicle they happen to pick up. An old Dodge Dart with a slant six? Perfect. Bulletproof engine that any teenager can fix with a screwdriver. Jack up the axles with wood blocks for better ground clearance. Carve out the trunk for a pickup bed. Screw a couple of spares to the roof. Weld on crash bumpers fore and aft. Stick on a tow ball. Desert car.

Among some specialty vehicles, J.R. has the six-wheel-drive ex-U.S. Army tanker truck that can negotiate the Sand Patch near my place. Even standard 4WD trucks bog down in the patch, but J.R.'s tanker truck (which he also uses to pull his road grader) powers through.

I have no prowess with an engine, no mechanical aptitude beyond changing a tire, and certainly nothing even resembling the mechanical aptitude possessed by the Tukes or J.R., and this is a big drawback out on the range. Mechanical ineptitude does not make for self-reliance in this milieu. And I don't have a truck, either. My only vehicle is the 1993 red Geo Metro. The designers did not have desert back roads in mind. It's underpowered (a three-cylinder engine), it's low slung, so it's easily high-centered on rutted, eroded dirt paths. It gets stuck in the sand easily and has trouble crawling over a roadside berm. On the upside, it sips gas. It's a tin can as light as a feather, easy to pull out of the sand traps. I've managed to make this car work for me at the Rancho by carrying the right gear.

The author's Geo loaded with salvaged tires. This puny three-cylinder car is completely inappropriate for desert homesteading except that the engine's reliable. The car's been stuck many times but has never broken down.

Jacks. All the desert homesteaders carry high-lift jacks. As J.R. says, there's a thousand ways to hurt yourself with one of these, but they have tremendous lifting force. Once, when a boxcar wind knocked over the shade shack at the rancho's firing range, my friend Gordon and I used the Hi-Jack to lift the shack enough until Gordon's pickup could get a purchase on the cable and pull it back into place. To use the Hi-Jack with the Geo, I've attached a length of heavy chain between the two metal lifting eyes on the front part of the chassis. The chain is loose enough to fit over the lip of the Hi-Jack. I can lift the whole front end of the car two feet in the air, plenty high enough to get some boards and rocks under the wheels.

Usually, though, if I'm not stuck too deep, I get out using a come-along attached to a five-foot metal fence post I carry with me. Using a sledge hammer, I drive the post twenty feet in front of the stuck car, and then use a tow strap and the come-along to ease the Geo out of the trap. Sometimes, when I need old tires for a tire pillar, I visit a hidden dump created by Indian Phil (before he went to prison for shooting the deputy). The route takes me over a short stretch of deep sand that would suck down the Geo in a second. To get over this, I carry (strapped on the roof) four eight-foot lengths of plywood, each about a foot wide, which I lay down in front of the car when I hit the swath of deep sand. I just keep switching the boards until I'm across.

I carry other jacks: two scissors and a bottle-nose, plus a couple of jack stands. I always carry a shovel, an assortment of old bathroom rugs (for wheel traction), a machete for gathering brush to push under the tires, and a pry bar for moving rocks. I also have a 12-volt air compressor. Often on washboard desert roads, I deflate my tires to 15 psi, which seems to make for an easier ride when cruising at 10-15 mph. Back at the asphalt, I reinflate.

Desert Road Kits

What else is in the Geo's essential road kit? Six gallons of water. An axe and hatchet. A large tarp to make shade while I puzzle over another fine mess. Flashlights. A little gizmo with red-green-amber lights that lets me know roughly how much juice is in a battery. Set of tools including socket wrenches. Emergency fan belt, plugs, and some other spares. (I might not know what to do with 'em but somebody else may happen along who does). I carry, count 'em, three spare tires. The desert specializes in sharp rocks and plants with pointy spines. I average about a flat a month. And then my own utility company (two marine batteries) reposes on the floorboards where the front passenger seat used to be.

At the 'stead, I have a $10 beat-up girl's bike I got at a garage sale that I strap to the roof on longer forays into the desert. If I get in a real jam, I load the bike with fifty pounds of water and push it home.

When I travel afield by car, I change the interior configuration slightly to make room for camping gear. Mostly, on the road, I tent, and I like to be comfortable. I carry an Alaknak-style tent that's big enough to stand up in. I like the center pole design (rather than the dome) because the tent is easy to pitch. Peg the four corners, stick in the pole, and the tent is up. For a quick overnight stay, that's all I do. For longer campouts, I peg guy lines to make the inside more voluminous. I sleep on a garage sale Army cot and carry the commissary in a couple of plastic bins. I use the same one-burner propane stove that does service at the hogan or at the trailer.

I've always had the Kleenex theory of car ownership. Use 'em and toss 'em. For me, cars aren't cathected. They are mere beasts of burden, whipped hard until their beast life is over, and sent to the knackers. I've bought many junkers, sold none. If I had any extra money for another vehicle, I'd look for some used, standard issue beat-to-shit two-wheel drive pickup. A gold miner

I once met out in the Black Rock Desert of Nevada told me that four-wheel drive only got him into trouble. Out in the desert by yourself and far from help, you really need to think about it if the road ahead needs four-wheel drive.

It's different for recreationalists who are just looking for thrills and have a buddy in another vehicle with an electric winch. The four-wheel-drive enthusiasts I've met in the mountains out near the Rancho, to me, seem ludicrous. I can *walk* faster than they're going — a verifiable truth, because *I am* walking when I come across them on some impossible grade, yelling at each other and using Hi-Jacks and winches to move their Jeeps another few feet over a pile of boulders. Most of the dirt roads around the Rancho are rutted washboard with the arroyos filled with sand and gravel. The Sand Trap is impassable and a lot of the other roads aren't a good idea, but the main ones everybody uses are fine for two-wheel drive. A passenger car, however, rides just a little too close to the ground.

In the Geo, I've been stuck or high-centered plenty of times, although I've always been able to get moving again in less than an hour. I'd be using the hypothetical pickup mainly to haul water and supplies to the Rancho and for moving trailers. For exploration, I'd use the pickup as I do my bicycle, which I ride as far as I can, and walk from there.

Even though my Geo is intrinsically unsuited for desert homesteading, I have to make it work for me. Sometimes, while lying in the hammock almost ready to drift off into a siesta, I strike upon something else I need to put in the little car to solve a potential crisis. The signal flares from my ex-sailboat. You could spot those babies for ten miles out here. The signal mirror from my backpack, while I'm on the subject. To alert passing aircraft.

The Hobo and his Clampett-mobile on the road to the Tuke's place.

Transportation Theories

I get so many good ideas at siesta time that I have to keep a notebook in my shirt pocket. In fact, lying in the hammock solving conceptual problems is what I'm especially good at. Just for your information, during my year as a committed car-less person, I worked on solving many of the nation's transportation problems. As I sat on the barely moving bus listening to the wheezing of the latest hollow-faced, drug-addled tubercular fellow commuter, I pondered the question of what kind of mass transit system could be made that commuters actually would want to use.

Some of the suburban commuter trains are pretty clean because they're expensive enough to discourage the riff-raff. *But the bus*? In a big city like LA, it's the stagecoach of last resort for Social Security paupers, recent immigrants from exotic climes, the physically and developmentally challenged, mentals, and other zanies. Now don't get on your high horse with me, mass transit boy. You wouldn't ride with 'em either unless you had to. My solution, which I offer gratis to the indifference of the world, is compartments. Buses and trains should have individual compartments so the rider doesn't have to mix with other, less-desirable humans. Also beverage service. As every Third World budget traveler knows, inter-city bus service in places like *Paraguay*, say, is much superior to what's offered by Greyhound. There's a stewardess. There's a Hollywood movie on the TV set. There's curtains on the windows so you won't be frightened by what's going on outside. That's pretty good, but European trains are better. They have compartments in first-class. But I'm thinking what might work in democratic America is dedicated, two-seat, forward-facing glassed-in compartments in all cars. This would have to be subsidized of course, so I suppose there's no mood for it. I don't see how the rich could get any benefit.

The other thing I mulled as a pedestrian and public transit rider was the proper clothing. As an LA bus rider, I didn't feel confident that my usual garb was sturdy enough to protect me in an attack. For instance, sometimes I felt just a little bit physically intimidated by some of my fellow passengers who were male juveniles just let out of school. Raucous, rude, and reeking of potato chips, they pushed and shoved their way onto the bus yelling obscenities. I could sense a vicious pack mentality. My only body armor was a blue cotton shirt and a pair of Dockers. Once, on an interminable ride through the bleak waste of South Central, a couple of kids in the seat behind me were talking loudly about the ozone layer. Its depletion, one kid said, only caused skin cancer among a certain subset of people, and he wasn't worried about it. In fact, he encouraged it. He said that when he used his hairspray in the morning, he'd *whoooosh*, give it a little extra flourish of fluoroclorohydrocarbons just to help increase the number of lesions among that certain group of people, of whom I happened to be the only example on the bus. Actually, he was pretty darn funny.

I did feel I could use more personal protection on foot and bus in the city. I changed from Rockports to guard boots. After being menaced one day by a nut with a stick, I started wearing a Popeye arm under my left sleeve — an idea I got from a cop. This is just a kid's soccer ankle guard worn under the shirtsleeve on the forearm with the pad outward. At a garage sale hosted by a lapsed body builder, I picked up a leather kidney strap. I started looking around for a motorcyclist's leather vest that could go under my billowy shirt. It wouldn't stop a bullet but might slow up a blade.

The head and neck are most vulnerable. But you don't really want to draw attention to yourself by wearing anything outlandish, or which telegraphs your possible concerns about personal safety. Often I rode buses that had bike racks on the prow. When I took my bike along, I could reasonably sport a bicycle helmet. I set aside the aerodynamic teardrop helmet and replaced it

with an all-sports design that looks like a plastic version of the German battle helmet. Maybe that will seem to some like going too far, but only to those Chablis-tasting *brie*-eaters who don't ride urban buses.

One time, on a bus in downtown LA, this young tough got on, talking to himself, clearly angry and deranged. He took the one vacant seat, next to me. He glared around at his fellow passengers malevolently, pulled out a big cigar, and lit up. "Please, nobody say anything," I thought to myself. "Excuse me," said a black-garbed Hassidic Jew across the aisle, "No smoking on the bus." The cigar aficionado went berserk. He's on his feet screaming: "*Are you cop? Are you a cop*? (It seemed unlikely.) *I know you're not my dad. And those are the only two people I take orders from!*" Thankfully, the bus driver, a burly giant, pulled over and threw the young guy off, thus making three authority figures the smoker needed to listen to.

Well, no public transportation runs to the desert homestead. The reliable car or truck, loaded with the tools of self-reliance, takes the place of the Metro. I think it's fun bumping along on desert dirt roads trailing a white plume of dust. Most visitors say the scenery is bleak and harsh with all those drab dun colors and the paucity of green. "So dry, so remote. So lacking in... signs of life, particularly human life. No houses or buildings." That's right. There's also no traffic, no smog, no stop lights, no CHP, no citations, and no traffic school. I prefer it, but I've taken enough precautions that I have a realistic expectation of extracting myself from a motoring mishap without counting on anyone else.

Chapter Ten
Utilities

Here, we'll look at how I manage to get the utility monkey off my back, and still have power, water, and sanitation.

Power

Back when I was a regional reporter for the *Orange County Register*, I made a side-trip to the tiny defunct mining ville of Darwin, out near Death Valley. I ran across a blissful dropout with a ZZ Top beard who said his entire personal utility company — lights and power — consisted of a candle stub and two double-A batteries for his Walkman. He was off the grid, outside the money economy, and almost off the planet. Of course, he was squatting in an abandoned cabin not his own, and probably felt he had to be ready to vacate on short notice in case the authorities showed up. Even so, it was impressive. Few can pare the watts like that and still get NPR.

This sort of off-the-grid minimalism appeals to me. The dope grower or the bootleg placer miner way up the canyon in Humboldt County don't need to be gouged by PG&E or Edison to cover the depredations of rapacious utility executives' who foisted deregulation on a fatuous government. Or look at the homely geezer couple in their boxy RV, even those obnoxious ones who fire up the generator at 6 am. They're pretty much giving the Italian salute to the utility moguls (while squirting cash through the nostrils at the oil companies). I take half my hat off to them. They aren't passive hostages to what the Demented Vet likes to call *sapismo* — the infinite capacity of the narcoleptic middle class to absorb a financial drubbing from corporations and the government.

Of course, for the most part I caved in like everybody else, and ponied up the pelf to the utilities. Oh, why not? For the one bedroom apartment crowd (in which I've always found myself), juice in Samland up until now has been pretty cheap. In my last standard-issue apartment box in heavy-duty metro Southern Cal, my electricity bill was like $35 a month, tops. But that was in Riverside County, where the local utility spurned the opportunity to jump aboard the California deregulation fiasco. And, I wasn't home much anyway (although I always forgot to turn off the lights).

Down the freeway, however, comparable wage serfs in LA pay twice as much, and out in the California summertime desert, the electric bills punch holes in the roof. In dusty, forlorn little Blythe, for instance, the summer temps hover around 110. If round-the-clock air conditioning is

thought to be mandatory, your monthly bill's gonna be in the double Xs. Or think about the saps in San Francisco who are scheduled for a royal screwing for years because of a court order to repay bankrupt PG&E.

I'd usually been a sap, too, but sometimes I'd escaped the utility boot on my neck by ingenious or ridiculous expedients. Back when I pretended to work for the *Orange County Register*, I resided on a sailboat. The modest berth rent at the Long Beach marina included all utilities, not that one can really amp up on the average sailboat.

In Blythe, during my short tour as editor of the local astonisher, I refused to turn on my AC in summer. In the inferno of a Blythe summer, I let the movie theater, the bar, and the restaurant keep me cool at night. I slept under a damp sheet and the breezes of two big electric fans, but no AC.

But now it ain't so much about money or even Bolshy prejudice against heartless monopolies that feather the nests of the execs but flip the switch on the welfare moms. No, it's just that now, out on the cheap desert homestead, I'm spurning the monopolies because I got no choice. Phil is off the grid. No power poles run out to the Smoke Tree Valley. I have to be my own utility.

Before I took up residence at the Rancho, I practiced being my own utility during the six months I spent at the Bureau of Land Management's long term visitors' area in the featureless plain outside Blythe. There were no services there, either, except for a dumpster provided by the city. Mine was the first trailer to arrive at mid-September, the beginning of the season, but by the first of January, some 80 or 90 RVers had hauled rolling aluminum onto the dirt in the visitors' area.

For a fee of $125, the trailer nomad can park his rig on BLM land for the whole season, eight months from September 15 to April 15. That's a pretty darn good price for rent. Same thing holds true across the Colorado River in Arizona, around Quartzsite, where the BLM has more of these snowbird visitors' areas. For your fee, you get no service except that the campground host, a civilian, may have the cell phone number for the ranger.

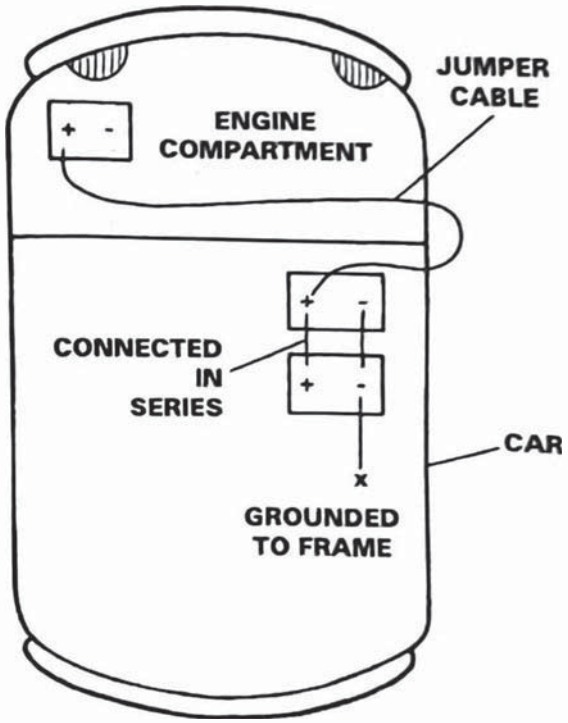
The Car as a Generator. Most of the RV types run their appliances off a gas-powered generator with an assist from a couple of solar panels. "Fine," I say to myself, "but why buy a pricey generator for up to a grand, when your car IS a generator?" Actually, it has an alternator, but it is the conceptual leap. To make it brief, I meet all of my electricity needs by harnessing the alternator that came installed under the hood of my little Geo to charge up a couple of deep-cycle marine batteries strapped down on the passenger-side floorboards of my car.

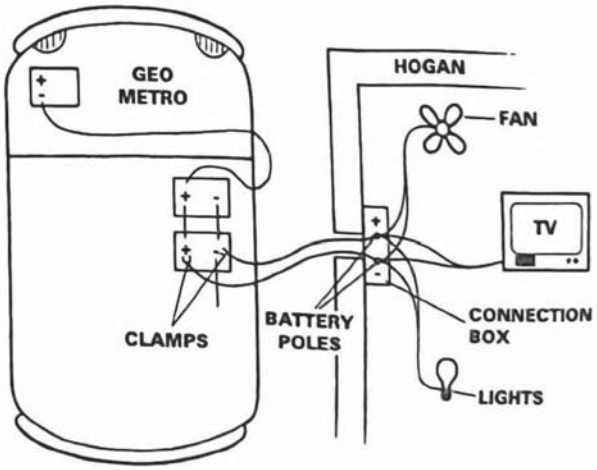
The hookup could hardly be simpler. I use an old booster cable, one end clamped to the positive battery terminal under the hood, the other end to the positive terminal of one of the marine batteries on the floorboards. I just run this cable right out under the hood and through the passenger-side window without any special holes or fittings. The marine batteries are linked in series, and the negative terminal is connected by wire to a bolt on the frame. I don't have to worry about overcharging the marine batteries, since I guess the charging is controlled by the car's regulator. I really don't know dick about electricity, so that's why my setup has to be butt simple.

To disconnect the marine batteries from the car battery, I just take off the cable clamp inside the car and ground it on the wood board that holds the marine batteries in place. That way, there's no chance of running down the car battery overnight while I'm using the marine batteries to power up the trailer or the Rancho's hogan.

During my stay at the BLM visitors' area, I sucked a plethora of power from the two batteries. I ran two fans, lights, stereo, a tiny beer cooler, an air filter, and a little TV/VCR combo. I

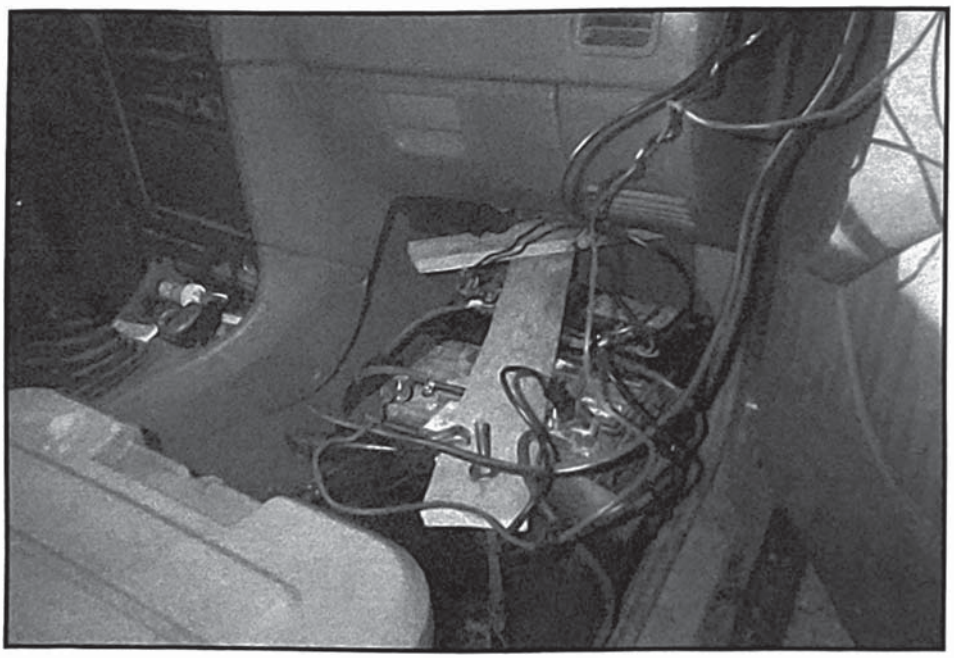
recharged the marine batteries every day when I drove to work. And I think that's realistically about what this arrangement can handle. Obviously, it couldn't cover major refrigeration or air conditioning, but I don't need that.





Power Hook-ups. At first, I used a sort of inconvenient cigarette plug and socket skein of wire to connect everything. The 12-volt appliances, like the fans and the TV, came with plugs meant for the car's cigarette lighter. At truck stops and RV stores, you find sockets for these plugs that are hooked to clamps that attach to battery terminals. So I'd hook these receptacles to the marine batteries and then plug in the appliances with extensions. It was too much trouble and the receptacles turned out to be delicate and easily broken.

Now I use a terminal board. The board has two marine battery terminals screwed to it, one... for... negative, one...for...positive. The permanent appliances, the lights and fans, are attached with connector rings to the bolts and screwed down tight by nuts. I cut the cigarette lighter plugs off the fans and replaced them with connector rings. The terminal board is screwed to a table near the window. A long set of skinny jumper cables is clamped to the bolts and dangles out the window. When I drive up next to the trailer, I reach out the passenger window, grab the cables and clamp them to the marine batteries. *Power.* The lights go on inside.

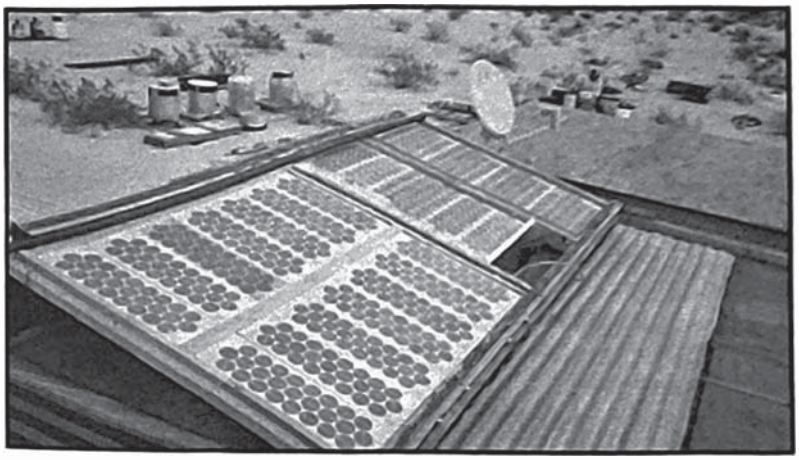


The Rancho's utility company complete. Two marine batteries in the front seat of the Geo. The batteries at this moment are plugged into the hogan. A jumper cable runs out the window and under the hood to clamp to the car's battery, and charges the marine batteries while I'm on the road. The two marine batteries are connected in series and grounded to the frame. The board clamps down the batteries so they don't come adrift in the event of a rollover.

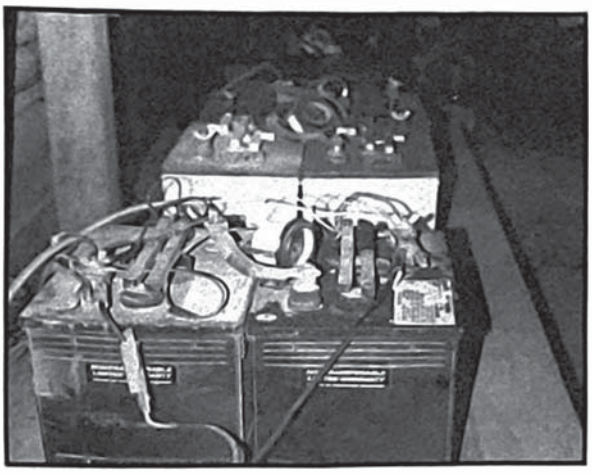
For lights at the trailer, I just removed and repositioned the 12-volt fixtures that were there. I put one over the bed for a reading lamp, another over the desk in the front room, a third in the hallway, and a fourth in the bathroom. Having been to a couple of dozen fast-moving, catastrophic trailer fires during my so-called career as a newspaper reporter, I don't trust the wiring in old trailers. So I rewired the lights. I disconnected all the fixtures from the wiring

inside the walls of the trailer. Then I stapled new wire in plain view along the outside of the wall panels, where I can keep an eye on it. For the 12-volt vacuum cleaner and the TV, I cut off the cigarette plugs and replaced them with battery clamps, which I attach to the terminal board when I need to use the appliance.

I also have one small solar panel on the roof that some friends, the gunmen from LA, gave me out of pity when they visited my trailer at the visitors' area. They didn't think I was smart enough to hook up the marine batteries to the trailer. Anyway, the panel is enough to trickle charge one mini-marine deep cycle battery that I keep in the front room as backup.



Solar panels on the roof of the Hobo's storage trailer.



The Hobo's battery bank.

And, oftentimes, when I was working late in Blythe, it's really all I used at night. I'd come home past ten, wouldn't even bother hooking up the car to the trailer, and get enough light off the little battery to read a paper and tap a beer before bedtime.

Okay, this is all good practice for the homestead. I still have the trailer, which I store for free at Pappy's trailer pasture during the blistering summer. But I put it out on the BLM visitors' area during the winter season as a *pied-a-terre* that's closer to town. My utility district, of course, moves with the Geo to each location.

The Rancho's hogan is set up exactly the same as the trailer with a utility board, located next to the window inside the hogan, that hooks up to the car. The 12-volt lights are some extras stripped from the trailer. I drive the Geo up to the hogan window and plug in with the jumper cables. The solar panel is small enough that I take it along when I shift my flag. And the panel and small battery, by the way, come in very handy during extended car camping, providing plenty of juice to run light and fans in the tent.

I also use the marine batteries to charge battery-powered tools using a 400 watt inverter. This cost me fifty bucks and converts 12-volt DC into 120 AC. It's kind of circuitous. The electric circular saw and the electric screwdriver come with battery chargers meant to plug into the wall at home. Instead of that, I plug the chargers into the inverter on my batteries, which then morphs 12 volt into 120 AC and back again into DC to charge the batteries of the appliances. Say what? Anyway, it works, and it means I can use these handy tools out at the homestead.

Mishaps to be mentioned. I set the Geo on fire once. A vagrant spark from a battery on the floorboard ignited the vinyl under the glove compartment. (Burning vinyl is hard to extinguish and noxious.) I had to pull over and swat it awhile. What happened, I think, was the metal on a battery clamp brushed up against some other conductor. (Now the clamps are wrapped in black electrician's tape, no metal showing.)

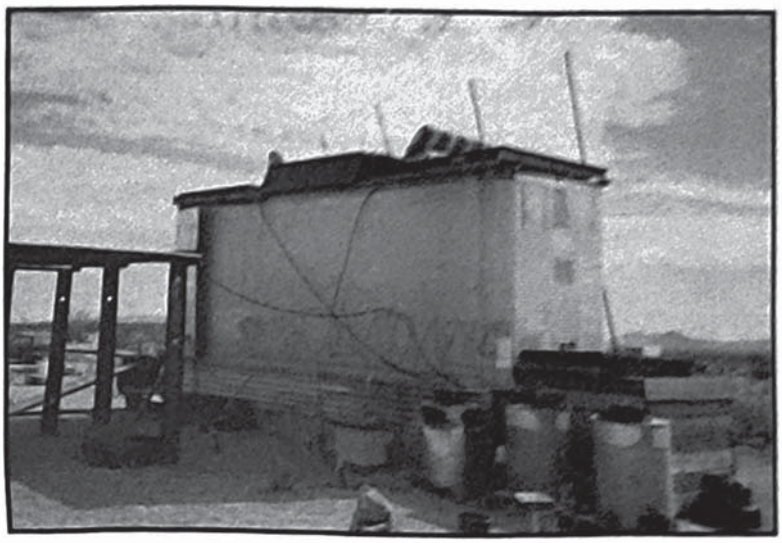
One time while camping, I discharged the car's battery by forgetting to disconnect it at night from the marine batteries. And I discharged the car battery only because I was using an amp-sucking 12-volt hair dryer to warm up my sleeping bag. But hey, no problem. The baby Geo, with standard transmission, is easy to push start.

Another caution I have is this. The heavy marine batteries on the floorboards of your car need to be clamped down in some way. I use a piece of board strapped and bolted to the floor. Think of an unplanned and unfortunate rollover. You don't want this already piquant experience to include loose batteries tumbling around the driver's compartment spewing acid.

Okay, as my own utility company, all my modest electricity needs are met at a cost of pretty much nothing, considering that I'm driving the car anyway and the alternator has plenty of extra charging potential. The marine batteries? One came with the junk trailer, the other from Kmart on sale for $30. The solar panel was a gift. The mini-marine battery came from my former sailboat. Maybe I'm not quite as energy efficient as the ZZ-Top guy from Darwin, but he doesn't have TV.

Water

So, what about water? A well is out of the question. It's too expensive and the water's usually salt when you hit it. Drinking water, at least, must be hauled from town hundreds of gallons at a time. That's what the homesteaders do. Out in my valley, J.R. may be willing to deliver some highly mineralized well water from his secret source, but that's only suitable for limited washing, gardening, and for running homemade evaporative coolers (provided the filters are cleaned every week).



The Hobo collects the runoff from the infrequent desert cloudbursts. The water runs from roof gutters through tubing and is collected in tanks.

The Hobo's solar hot water heater.

An overview of the Hobo's water system.
PVC pipe on the right runs to a sink for dish washing.

Plumbing & Showers. Obviously, the dirt cheap homestead does not have plumbing or running water that comes out of a pipe. So what does one do?

Earlier in my on-again off-again rural living career, I stayed at the Amenity-less Horror, a cabin in Lassen County. I made a shower stall out of a big plastic garbage can. I cut a horseshoe opening in one side to allow the bather to step in without raising the knee too high. The water streamed from a three-gallon pressure garden sprayer hanging from a peg overhead. I heated water on the stove, fed that into the sprayer with some cool water until the temp seemed about right, gave the handle a couple of dozen pumps, and enjoyed a two-minute shower. This was a scheme I'd seen on cruising sailboats that easily adapted to homestead life.

On the boat, of course, one sluiced down with a wash cloth and a bucket of warm water first, then rinsed off with the garden sprayer. Heating the bath water on the stove worked well in northern climes, but out in the desert there was little reason to waste propane when the sun's shining.

Every camping store offers various solar showers: black bladders with nozzles. Don't waste your money. A couple or three regular plastic gallon water jugs set out in the sun for a few hours will do it. Spray paint them black if you want, but that's not really necessary.

I first saw this at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire while working as a parking lot attendant. The faire employees camped in tents in a compound. After the faire closed for the day, women dressed in Elizabethan garb drifted down to their tents and changed into loose-fitting shifts. Then they'd come out on the grass, pick up their gallon jugs of water that had been warming all day in the sun, and pour the water over their heads with one hand while washing off underneath the shifts with the other. At the Burning Man Festival in Nevada's Black Rock Desert, it was the same deal, except nobody bothered to wear shifts or any other clothing. People stood in the nude and poured plastic jugs of water on themselves.

At the Rancho, I use a child's plastic wading pool as a primary bathing venue set in the shade inside the compound walls. Water in gallon jugs warms along the south wall all day. If it's windy, I put them in the car in direct sunlight, or in the window of the solarium. Stick a finger in to make sure it isn't too hot. I pour some water in a bucket for the full-body sluice, then rinse off by gurgling a few jugs of water on my head. This is pretty much how people bathe in much of the plumbing-free world. It's good enough for the average homestead afternoon, when the demands of society aren't great.

One alternative I tried worked great, but was just a little too much trouble. I put the bilge pump from my former sailboat in a five-gallon bucket and used it to pump a stream of water. But then I had to drag out a battery to run the pump, and really, the gallon jugs gurgled on the head work just as well.

I do have a more sybaritic alternative: a bathtub, set under an awning on the east side of the compound. It really should be one of those claw-footed porcelain tubs that are so cool, but way beyond the budget of the dirt cheap homesteader, unless you're willing to steal one from some rancher's pasture. Otherwise, they've all been snapped up by the yups. So I have a battered old tub for a few bucks from out of a salvage yard. It's one of those that fit into an apartment wall (and at the Rancho I had to build a wooden trestle to set it against). This works for the luxuriant soak, but frankly only once a week before going to town, since it takes a lot more fresh water (maybe 20 gallons). I draw this water by gravity out of a clear 80-gallon plastic tank propped on the roof of the hogan. I've never tested with a thermometer, but by the baby bottle method, I'm guessing the temperature in this tank on a sunny autumn day hovers around 90 degrees. Bath water.

The first five minutes or so of the bath are pretty darn pleasant, but after that any vast body of water in the desert will draw flying insects. Soon bees, flies and wasps are hovering over the suds. So, because of water scarcity and insects, the shower works out better than the bath tub. Maybe an improvement some day will be a frame around the tub on which to stretch some netting.

In the case of the shower, the process is completed before the bugs bone in. I never leave standing water inside the compound. I now use a plastic laundry tub because it makes it easier, after the shower, to take the gray water outside and pour it on the sand. One day, the theoretical garden may sop up this gray water. I use a plastic shower curtain off one of my former boats, just because I have it. And the curtain has been enough to confuse the early arriving insects. Since water is scarce, I keep the daily shower ration at three or four gallons. For the rare bath, I use whatever's left in the tank before I go to town.

Naked Paul, the bookstore owner in Quartzsite, takes a shower every hour or so in the summer to cool off, and swears by it. "The secret to staying cool," he says. In that case, you wouldn't want to use soap every time, since the soap lifts off the skin's protective oils. As a sailor, I've seen the same kind of frequent shower thing in the titty bars in Mexico, where after every session twirling on the tube, the girls hop under the nozzle, dozens of times a night.

Maybe that's where Naked Paul got the idea. Before opening the bookstore, he was a burlesque performer who played piano in the nude (except for white gloves) as an opening act for the strippers. (He's got the scrapbooks to prove it.) He appeared under the name Sweet Pie, and one of his other talents was dangling heavy objects from his scrotum. He built up the strength of his tendons over time, starting with tennis shoes and building up to bowling balls. When he toured Canada, he'd swipe chain saws from pickups in the parking lot and use 'em in the act. If a lumberjack objected to having his saw suspended this way, Paul invited him up on stage to retrieve it.

Anyway, at the Rancho, there's not enough water for hourly showers, no matter how hot it gets.

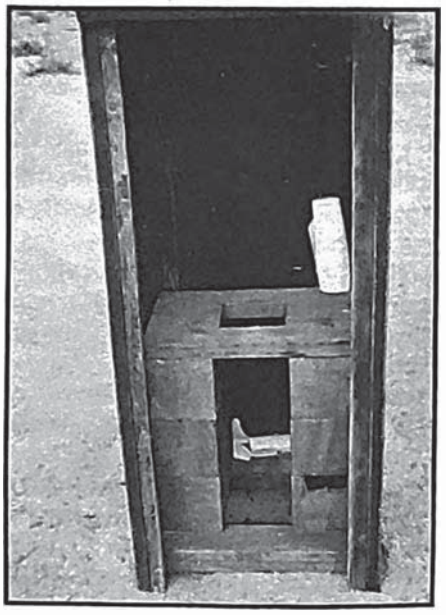
In pioneer days, desert dwellers on hot nights wrapped themselves with wet bed sheets. I've tried this on breathless summer nights in Blythe and it works, if done in conjunction with an electric fan blowing right on you. You *are* a swamp cooler.

The old pioneers told of another idea I guess I'll try eventually. They piled up rocks in a galvanized wash tub set off the ground on some boards. At the bottom of the tub, they drilled a hole for a cork. Then they poured buckets of water on the rocks. The evaporation off the rocks allegedly had a cooling effect. After awhile, they would pull the cork, drain the water and start over. (This probably works better if you have kids to do this for you.)

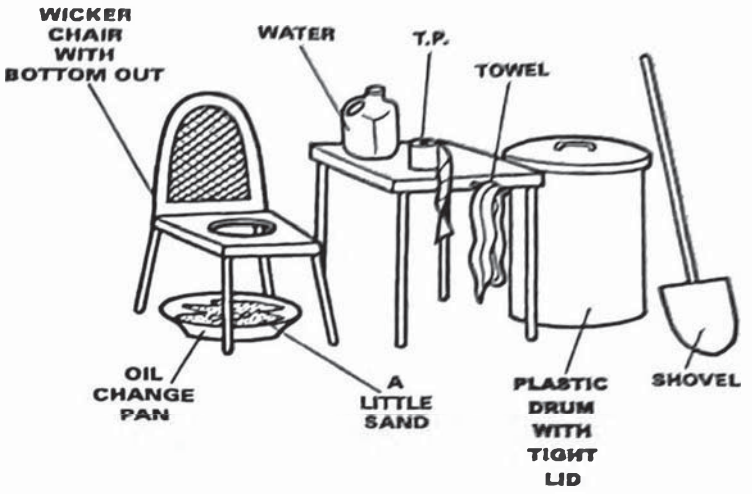
Sanitation

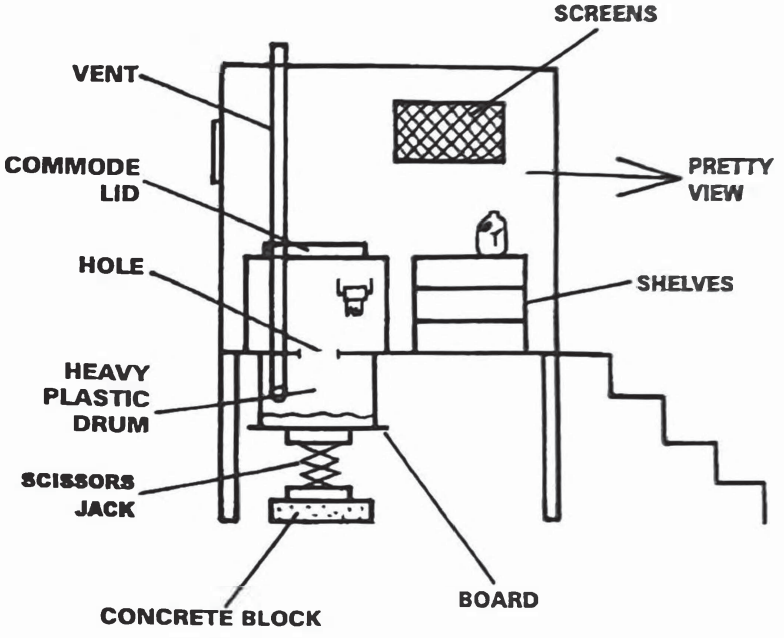
Sanitation arrangements at the Rancho have evolved from the simian to the proto-human. Originally, during the skeet shooting days, cat holes and sponge baths were the rule: a roll of toilet paper on the shovel handle, a bucket, and a wash rag. Now, you could almost invite company over. A pressure shower, a bathtub, and a vented outhouse with a composting toilet.

To be brutally transparent, the new bathroom isn't used by me. Inch-worm peristalsis usually commands an intermission in my morning walk. I make an indentation with my boot heel and unencumber my bowel on the spot.



A desert latrine.





I also sometimes still use an intermediate stage in commode evolution that I rigged up while building the fancy outhouse. (This was a shade *ramada* with tarp siding that partially conceals a bottomless wicker chair with a bucket set underneath.) After using this facility, I simply dump the contents of the bucket into a plastic trash can that has some dirt and sulfur in it for anaerobic composting. Both the trash can and the bucket have lids to defeat insect interest. Actually, for the bachelor homesteader who doesn't expect fastidious visitors, this arrangement's probably

enough. The spacious outhouse really is more for the visiting urbanite accustomed to grander things. It offers an approximation of plumbing, with the added cachet of a pleasant seat with a sweeping view of the mountains.

Hygiene. I think right now might be an apt time to review for the would-be desert homesteader some of the basics of hygiene when plumbing isn't available. Off the grid, and off the pipe, too. When hiking or homesteading in the primitive way, I always follow the rules of field sanitation I learned while a member of that well-known paramilitary organization, the Boy Scouts of America. I bury the corpse in a shallow grave. I carefully burn the toilet paper (without setting the woods on fire) so the critters won't scatter it around. When camping, I bathe and keep clean. I wash the mitts and pits and crotch. *But wait a minute here.* Don't take my word for this stuff. Listen to an expert.

During a raft trip down the Grand Canyon a few years ago, one of the participants was suffering the agonies of amoebic dysentery, a complaint he'd picked up a few weeks before in a foreign clime on another raft trip. Apropos of this, I was talking with one of the boatmen about hygiene on the road, particularly in the land of the left-handed wipe. He knew about it, because when he wasn't pulling an oar on a river, he led treks in the Himalayas.

The boatman sayeth: "It amazes me the way some of the Yuppie scum types who fanatically shower every day at home turn into smelly slobs when they don't have plumbing available on a hike in the boonies. There's no excuse for being dirty, no matter where you travel, as long as you can find a cup of water for a wash. In rural China, you see the peasants every morning headed for the woods with a pail and a rag. They shit, and then clean their ass. The bidet never caught on in America, but everybody ought to wash his butt after taking a shit. I'll tellya, a lot less problems on a long walk, because you don't want an infection getting started on the asshole.

"I carry washrags in Ziploc plastic bags in my pack. Color-coded. One's for the pits, one's for the crotch. I use a quart-sized Ziploc to hold water if I don't have a pot. Another of the Ziplocs is filled with a little rubbing alcohol, and here's where I put the used washcloths until I find a laundry.

"On the road in America, I often clean up in a fast food restaurant john. Generally, the fast food johns are pretty clean. I go into a stall with a water bottle, motel soap, and a couple of wash rags, one for the pelvis, one for the rest of the bod. It only takes a few minutes to wash the pits, the groin, the butt, those being the major areas that need attention. If I don't have washrags with me, I wet some paper towels and take them into the stall. But never put the paper towels down the toilet. Clog the plumbing. Wrap 'em up in a toilet liner and put 'em in the trash. I wipe first with toilet paper, then with the wet paper towels, and finish up with a toilet liner. The cheap toilet paper in a public john disintegrates too easily if it gets wet. You don't want crumbly paper in your butt.

"In Third World countries, it's more of a challenge, particularly the public johns, say like at the Bombay train station. *Fuck!* If you don't have your own stuff, usually you can buy some sheets of toilet paper from somebody at the entrance to the shitter. It helps if you have strong legs, because you really don't want to sit on a can in some of these places. The bus stations in boondocks Guatemala. Aye yi yi. If there's a regular toilet, I put up the lid, stand on the bowl, and squat. Most people know that in countries like Mexico you put the dirty paper in the wastebasket by the bowl. The plumbing will clog if you put any kinda paper in the toilet. Many crappers in the less developed world are so filthy it's a good idea to roll up your pants before you unbuckle. As a general precaution, I always spray the cuffs of my pants with a bug spray that has permithrin to tamp down the cooties, particularly ticks and fleas. A lot of Third World johns just

have a hole in a concrete slab, and that's really easier. The more tropical the country, the more you want to clean up thoroughly after a shit, to avoid getting a rash that won't be fun on a hike. In some rural parts of Muslim countries, they frown on the use of toilet paper. Isn't covered in the Koran. You're supposed to use your left hand. Right hand is for eating. I've seen places in Africa where the folks just dump anywhere, wipe, and clean the hand with a bunch of grass. Not as bad as it sounds. Because of their starchy diet their shit comes out clean like dog shit. Not the drizzly mess that comes out of the Western gut.

"Out in the boonies, I'm Sierra Club. Dig a little cat hole with my heel. Burn the toilet paper. I'm a big believer in hydrogen peroxide or rubbing alcohol to clean the hands. I'm paranoid but I don't get sick either, like that poor asshole.

"After I use the public phone in Katmandu, I'm puttin' alcohol on my hands. Same in the States. I carry squares of cotton swab drenched in alcohol in a Ziploc. If nobody's watching, I wipe off the phone mouthpiece with one of the wipes.

"When I'm car camping in a campground and there isn't an outhouse handy, I use a bucket in my tent. I line the bucket with a couple of plastic grocery bags. After I'm through I tie it up tight and toss it in the dumpster.

"You know what, though. One of the worst things is trying to find a place to whiz in a downtown American city. Paris has *pissoirs*, but we're not that civilized. Particularly after nine-eleven, all the public buildings in America are under guard, and they don't want a long-haired freak with a backpack using the john. A chain fast food joint or Denny's is the best bet. If you go into a fancy restaurant to take a leak, they always give you the fish eye. Sometimes in LA I just sneak into a wino alley and piss into one of my empty canteens. Rinse it out later.

"In motels, I sometimes take a piss in the shower but never a dump. Ha ha. But no matter how careful I am I always get the drizzles eventually. But I've never got hep or cholera or that amoebic shit that guy has. I've known a lot of Peace Corps guys who say, 'I'm just gonna go ahead and drink the water straight out of the *pozo* and habituate my gut to the local flora.' So for six months out of their two year tour, they're sick as dogs and waste down to like ninety pounds. But they're staying in the same ville, and they can get used to the local bugs. I travel too much to try anything like that. I'm never gonna habituate my gut to every bug in Asia, Africa and Latin America. So I'm always paranoid about water, food and hygiene. Because it's the worst. Being gut sick with the shits and a flaming fever in some dingy flop in Kathmandu."

Conversations with the Demented Vet, V

"What brings you up here today? Run out of tomato soup down there at the Turd-hole? You know, Phil, the world is divided between slaves... and guys like you, with way too much time on your hands. You could be mistaken for a boss, except you don't have a pot to piss in. You know the way you can tell the true slave? If his leisure looks like his work. Look at those idiots down on the Colorado right now running around in their little boats. They're all the same. Some stressed-out dude working twelve-five in an auto supply outlet in West Covina. On Friday night he hitches his trailer to the pickup and hauls his speedboat two hundred miles through the desert. He drinks his brains out, screams around on the water all day, then hauls back in heavy

traffic to his crowded tenement in the air sewer. And starts over. He's had to cram his fun into a day and the rest of his life belongs to the straw boss. Serf dudes. But you know, Phil, you can be an ass-kissing butt-sucking peon even if you're making two hundred grand a year.

"Who can tell me *what to do? Who? The ranger? The deputy? I don't think so. They know better. See that Kalasnikov? They've seen it too. I live by my own rules. But you work for the Borg and you live on your knees. You're in the world to please others. It doesn't matter how big a desk you got, you're a grunt in the ranks. And it doesn't matter how hoity-toity you think you might be, pretty soon you'll start crawling on your belly like a reptile. You're always discussing the bosses. What can we do to appease them? Did you notice the way he spoke to me in a stern voice? A bunch of cotton pickers spending the happy hour talking about the whip hand of the overseer.* Why? *Because most people really are serfs. They've been bred and trained from the cradle, by their parents and teachers, to take orders. They* need *to be told what to do.*

"Oh, we're all infected in this culture. We've all been neuralized by the Borg. Incessant propaganda from the Borg channel from Day One, telling us what to do. That's what the plutocrats want, Phil. A compliant, docile work force that will piss away its disposable income to buck up the economy. The Borg says buy. You don't need it, buy it anyway. The Borg channel says buy a house, buy a new car, get a good job, spawn some brats who'll bled you dry for the rest of your life. The Borg says stay at your bench except for a two-week authorized fun vacation. Unless we happen to need you to take time off to whack some foreigners. The Borg channel says taking orders and working for others is good for you. What you *want?* Who gives a fuck? *Resistance is futile. The Borg wants you to fall in, and to sniff at anybody who doesn't line up on the guide-on. You* need *a bigger TV. You* must *pay your taxes, if you want to be a good citizen. It's your* duty *to spend your whole life under the thumb of some fat bastard.*

"I got a buddy who's still in the VA hospital, Phil. Thirty years in the VA dayroom. Mortar round hung up in the vines over his head. He's all fucked up. He's a sap! *The people who get killed in wars are saps. I go see him, it's pathetic. Proud to have served.* He's a wasted cripple. *And even if the VA hospital was a palace instead of a dump, and even if a grateful nation kissed his ass on prime time TV he'd still be a wasted cripple. He sits all day in front of the Borg tube and raves about the environmentalists. Drill the Arctic refuge. Slaughter all the penguins and reindeer or whatever fuck kind of ungulate they got up there. The nation can't be dependent on foreign oil. Clear-cut Yosemite. Dig coal out of the Grand Canyon. McD's on every corner. That's what sitting in front of the Borg channel all day will do to you, Phil. Neuralize your brain.*

"I used to know this guy who hung out at Wheelies. He stuck up minimarts, and he's an idiot, but at least he wasn't neuralized. He refused to take the program that everybody had set out for him. He went to prison for five but later he said his big mistake had been he couldn't make up his mind. He was like most people in that respect. He didn't know what he really wanted when he went in the door. Bud? Bud Light? The nachos? A hot dog? He didn't know. He hesitated. The cops showed up.

"You have to know what you want. Do you want to be a free man? Do you want to make your own calls? Do you want to live for yourself or crawl on your belly for others? And what's the price? You have to know if you can bust out and live on your feet. Or go along with the sapismo *like everybody else."*

Chapter Eleven
Life at Rancho Costa Nada

Here's where you learn a bunch of basics on life in a dirt cheap desert homestead. First up, we'll talk about food and clothing, the basics since the hogan covers shelter. Then we'll hit the residual activities from chores to sex.

Food

The Boondocks Gourmet's Little or No Refrigeration Diet

The true *bona fide* dirt cheap desert homestead probably won't have refrigeration. Sure, many of the *rattass desertcuss* out here have propane fridges in mimicry of their upscale cousins in rolling aluminum. Or maybe they don't mind lugging a hundred pounds of ice every week. In that case, proceed as usual along the primrose path of self-indulgent profligacy. Your diet can be as meaty and dairy rich as any urban wastrel with a white box plugged into the wall.

The Little or No Refrigeration Diet is aimed rather at the boondocks gourmet who, either because of the fiscal constraints of gentile bohemian penury or because it's just too much damn bother to lug ice or propane bottles out to the scatter, chooses to forgo a modern luxury that most coddled, cosseted Yanks consider a necessity and a birth right: cold storage. I do without it. Or rather, I let the supermarket take care of it for me by keeping food items crisp or cold until I'm ready to use them.

No health claims are made for the Little or No Refrigeration Diet. I have to say, since it's based mostly on whole grain, legumes, and tubers, and since it's pretty much vegetarian and sort of low in fat to boot, it could be that it's good for the pump and pipes. I don't know. On the other hand, it's understandably a little light on the fresh leafy greens that the health mavens seem to promote. It depends instead on some basic fruits (such as apples, oranges, melons), and hardy roots (such as tates, beets and yams, plus that stand up vegetable cabbage) that all hold up pretty well without refrigeration. (These days, a lot of produce comes to the market unripe anyway and can stand some shelf time before hitting the table.)

As for the gourmet part, that's meant to be ironic. A little joke. No claims are made in that department either. A knowing cook with an array of spices and other condiments probably could do plenty to power up the savor of these recipes. She knows what she's doing and doesn't need me to put my spoon in. This is more for the average mope, probably male, who may never have been in the kind of culinary hard place, (before his straightened circumstances drove him into the de-

sert) where he couldn't pull a carton of ice cream out of the fridge. I admit right off the bat that a lot of the advice here is based on the expediency of backpacking, sailing, or tent camping beyond the electrical outlet, rather than on what's intrinsically tasty or nutritious.

First let's study the food groups that are the underpinning of a no refrigeration diet. They would be: oatmeal, rice, spaghetti and other noodles, powdered milk, corn and wheat flour, olive oil, instant potatoes, sugar and honey, whole nuts (almonds, peanuts, sunflower seeds), breakfast cereals, dried beans, and hard Parmesan cheese. Cork this stuff in some kind of dry container and it pretty much has unlimited hang time. Then you might go for the root group wrapped in newspaper and stored in a box in some shady corner: your spuds, yams and beets. My empirical experience is that some foods literally seem to last forever. Honey, for instance. Archeologists have dug pots of it out of a Pharaoh's tomb. Seven thousand years old and you could spread it on a biscuit. I think some of the nonfat cheese products could last as long.

Then there is stuff for the tin. I go for black beans, spinach, tomato sauce, tuna, salmon, sardines, corn, peaches, applesauce, green beans, and olives.

A few fresh fruits that will keep awhile if put in the shade: apples, limes, oranges, hard melons, green bananas. The cellophane packages of lettuce will last a couple of days unopened before the contents corrupt into green syrup.

Okay. Sometimes I bring back to the hogan a small ice chest with a few items I plan to use up right away: cottage cheese, yogurt, maybe some chicken (if it's on sale), or a cube steak. The other cheese I use is a block of nonfat stuff that melts into glue and tastes something like candy wax lips but that will outlive Methuselah. (I took some on a two-week summer backpack, keeping it in a standard Ziploc baggie, and it went the distance without a spot.)

What you don't have much use for on the unrefrigerated desert homestead is mayonnaise, meat, salad dressing, fresh milk, fresh eggs, heads of lettuce, or any of the myriad stuff that says "Refrigerate after opening."

IMHO, not having a refrigerator (or air conditioning) is a lot like not having a mortgage. It's freedom. It means that the bank of marine batteries on the floorboard of my Geo is all the utility I need. That and a bottle of propane once in awhile for the little stove. It's cold storage that costs dough and that's a pain in the butt off the grid. If you can get by without it — and you can get by without — a huge burden lifts from the homesteader's shoulder.

I've actually heard a grown and otherwise stalwart kind of stand-up guy say to me, "I couldn't drink powdered milk." *What a pussy!* It's like the woman who said, "No toaster? I couldn't *live* without a toaster." What are these people thinking? There is no hardship. You toast your grilled cheese sandwich in the frying pan. Why not use it for regular toast? Jesus, people.

The Evap Box. Not having refrigeration doesn't mean you can't keep food cooler than the surrounding air temperature. This is done by putting the food inside an evaporative box. It's just a suspended wood crate draped with burlap and hanging in the shade where the breeze can hit it. A big plastic bottle with pinholes in the bottom sits on beer caps atop the box. The jug slowly drips water onto the cloth to keep it wet. To get the evaporative process off to a good start, I usually sluice down the burlap first thing in the morning while the coffee pot's boiling. At the Rancho, the 'vap box's mostly used to keep beer at pub temperature. But maybe it holds some tomatoes and squash too, since people are always giving away these profligate and ubiquitous veggies. Along with keeping the beer at pub temperature, the 'vap box also is good enough to give carrots and the broccoli another few days of life. But don't try it on hamburger.

The no-refrigeration diet doesn't mean the off-the-grid homesteader lacks fresh food. But he needs to do a soupcon of planning. Generally, I make a visit to the Albertson's supermarket in Blythe, 45 miles away, about once a week. While I'm lolling around in the desert, Albertson's kindly refrigerates the fresh vegetables until my arrival. Some homesteaders bring large ice chests and ice down the meat and milk they carry back to the desert. Since I don't use fresh meat or milk or eggs, I don't bother except for that little ice chest that'll hold seven pounds of ice and a few little deals like yogurt and peaches for the next day's breakfast. My plan is to consume the rest of the fresh produce that I buy in stages according to its perishability.

Let's say I hit Albertson's on a Monday. That night, back at the homestead, I have a fresh green salad with the soft avocado, asparagus, celery, carrots, and Swiss chard. Meanwhile, the tomatoes, the oranges, the apples, and the hard avocados are all in the hanging basket, slowly ripening. By day two, the remaining carrots may have turned up their toes, but they're still good enough for the stew pot with some squash, green peppers, and spuds. By day three, those green hard commercial tomatoes are bursting with pudgy ripeness and ready for slicing. The apples and oranges and tomatoes, hardened by God knows what kind of pesticides and gasses, cruise through the week with ease, even with triple digit temps. Cabbage? Wrap it in newspaper and stick it in the shade and it'll last a month. Ditto spuds. Zucchini can get a little puckered in the heat but will hold out until Friday. A plastic bag of pre-cut lettuce unopened and floated in a bucket of warm water will remain semi-crisp until Wednesday. Root vegetables like beets and yams are bullet proof for the weekend barbeque.

Cooking. I have to say as a safety note that I practice the rolling boil method of cuisine toward the end of the week. Monday, fresh salad. Tuesday, Wednesday, steamed vegetables. After that, I boil everything just to settle the hash of any musty pathogen that's climbed aboard a droopy carrot or celery stalk. If by any chance any vegetable escapes the table for a week and begins to spot, I assign it to compost, meant someday to nurse the so-far theoretical garden. But in practice, hardy items like cabbage and tates sometimes can stand tall for a moon in the desert before turning to mush.

The bachelor desert gourmet (as represented by me) does all his cooking over a one-burner propane backpacking stove. I have a two-burner Coleman but that turns out to be an unnecessary luxury. With two burners, I start to make the mistake of cooking more than one person decently can consume at a sitting. I eat in courses. Prepare one thing. Eat it. Prepare the next course. Eat that. A lot less wastage. And since I usually eat outside, it's easier to fend off the insects when consuming one course at a time.

One time, as an experiment, I tried a version of the fireless cooker, an idea that came from a visit years ago to a backyard bomb shelter. For cooking something like whole grain rice, for instance, you bring the rice to a boil in a pot for a couple of minutes, then wrap the pot in a towel and stick it in a bucket. Surround and cover the towel and pot with tightly scrunched newspapers to hold the heat, and in a few hours the rice is cooked. A good steel Thermos would work too.

Some namby-pamby visitors, aware of the Spartan board offered at the Rancho, bring their own meals on wheels. When the gunmen roll in from LA, they do most of their cooking with a Dutch oven set in the embers of the campfire, and for that they bring ice chests loaded with pork roasts and whole chickens. But this kind of prodigality depends on big inputs of gasoline and ice.

Phil's Meal Plan. Just as one example of the financially comfortable No Fridge Diet, I'm going to run down a little of my usual eating program at the Rancho. It's a model of simplicity (which it needs to be), with the meals requiring only a few pots and utensils. Now, unlike most cooks, when I give a recipe, I won't include measurements. The boondocks gourmet doesn't

measure. He speculates. That way, every meal is a little different, sometimes a lot different. Anyway, much tolerance is built into the recipes and a lack of precision doesn't seem to matter much.

A big breakfast starts with a beverage. You're probably going to have a cup of joe or a Jolt cola, but these days I'm steering away from the big caffeine fix. My beverage is either hot chocolate or cafe con leche. For the former, I mix some plain old dry chocolate powder, powdered milk, and sugar in the bottom of the cup with an ounce or so of water, stir it a little, then pour boiling water to the brim. For cafe con leche, I put instant coffee and boiling water in the bottom half of the cup. In a separate glass, I mix a good thick syrup of powdered milk and a squirt of water, and pour it into the coffee mug. If you're lactose intolerant, don't try this.

For breakfast, I either have flapjacks or a bowl of oatmeal. My recipe for the cakes is to mix together white flour, whole wheat flour, powdered milk, a soupcon of baking powder, and a smidge of miller's bran. Then add corn oil and water, stir, and let sit. If the mixture turns out runny, it's for crepes, medium it's a flapjack, thick it's a biscuit. I spread the cake with a little olive oil and syrup.

If it's going to be oatmeal, I goose the bland pap with sunflower seeds, almonds, peanuts, raisins, dried apricots, honey, powdered milk and some applesauce from a little individual cup.

Now I've gone for a walk in the cool of the morn, taken care of biz in the jakes, puttered around a little, lay in the hammock while reading a book or musing, and now we're rollin' up on lunchtime. When the gunmen from the city are out at the Rancho popping caps, they have sandwiches for lunch: roast beef, pastrami, and turkey that they bring in their behemoth ice chests, smoking with dry ice, along with cheese, the pickles and the mayo, and the bone dry Chardonnay.

When the gunmen come out from the city, dinners also get very elaborate: slabs of seared, quivering animal roast in a bed of cooked leeks and potatoes; fresh corn; cobbler; whiskey and cigars and excellent wine. Not the dirt cheap style by a long peg, this is all made possible only because ...*they* work. They commute in nightmarish traffic, punch in at the pod, take senseless orders and obey soul-less overseers. But ...I have to say, when the work-a-daddy visitors alight, I appreciate it when we're having the $20 bottle of red.

They also have sliced bread for their sandwiches. During the week at the unrefrigerated Rancho, commercial sandwich bread doesn't hold up too well, even if it's loaded with preservatives and trans fats. In two days, it's either hard as a rock or green as a frog. My sheet anchor breadstuff for lunch is the flat, square matzo cracker, whole wheat or white. These babies, which are just baked flour and water, persevere like ship biscuits. It's hard tack without the weevils. I put a little olive oil and honey on the cracker. When backpacking, the lunch might be matzo crackers, wax lip cheese, almonds or gorp, and a tin of sardines. On the Rancho, though, the main course probably will be soup.

Many ways to prepare, but often my soup is based on the can of beans, pinto or black. Pour in the pan with a thimble of water and season with pretty much everything on the shelf: minced onion, powdered garlic, the various Dashes, black pepper and chili, with a garnish of Parmesan cheese. Often, tomato sauce goes in the soup, too.

Those little eight-ounce cans of tomato sauce are a goddamned bargain! They cost about a quarter each on sale and are great for the homestead. Versatile? I guess so. Open the can. A little water in it, sugar, the spice rack, and all by itself, it's tomato soup. Add powdered milk, you get cream of tomato. Hold the water, and put in honey, vinegar and the spice rack, and it's either catsup or spaghetti sauce. Equal parts water, the spice rack, a stalk of celery, and a shot of vodka...

well, you know what that is. Sometimes I pour the catsup version over a can of fish as an appetizer while I'm waiting on the soup.

I either eat the soup and crackers at the table in the cook shack or wander out to the compound and sit on a stool against the wall, where I can get the breeze. The beverage is water usually, but generic Tang is available in the cupboard. I don't ever hit the beer cooler until the sun's below the yardarm. It's too easy to fall into the bottle on an isolated homestead. I keep it to three brews a day, at eventide.

Dinner isn't necessarily a big meal, but it's the most creative. It's a traditional thing. Okay, a lot of times it's just spaghetti and maybe a root. But I've made cabbage and potato tacos, stir fried rice and broccoli, a wax lips blintz (or maybe it was a crepe), textured soybean burger with raw onion and pickles, ollie-ollie-allcomefree stew (a medley of vegetables one stop short of the compost), and lots of mac and cheese. The dinner hour is also welcome because it doubles as the cocktail hour, which also coincides with the usual garish desert sunset.

As a cook, I've pioneered some interesting menus. Usually, the breakthroughs have followed expedient substitutions. I came up with the PCT, for instance (peanuts (and olive oil), cabbage, and tomato sandwich) since the BLT isn't really possible at the unrefrigerated homestead. I'm pretty sure I can claim spaghetti and sunflower seed with garlic, basil, and olive oil. Tomato/beet soup tastes better than you might think. So does applesauce and sweet pickle relish. Spinach soup happened on a Friday just before going into town for groceries. Generally, though, I stick with a sort of recognizable nursing home kind of menu.

As a probably unneeded health precaution, I round out my prosaic evening meal by chewing one children's vitamin and one children's aspirin, as I have for years. (The only time I ever got questioned at a customs checkpoint during a lengthy last-class tour of South America was while crossing from Chile into Argentina on the way to Bariloche. The usual customs shed, with the long table, had all the duffels spread out before teenage soldiers with machine guns. The boy soldiers had gathered around my bag. One of them, eyes hardened with suspicion, held a handful of pills to my face. "*Vitaminas*," I explained lamely. Which admittedly happened to be shaped like possibly subversive Ninja Turtles. Hey, pal, at least they're not Purple Owsleys.)

Cleanup at the Rancho is pretty simple too. I use paper plates to eat from and for cutting and chopping veggies. I used to use china plates, and employed the Boy Scout, or maybe the bar well method for washing the plate, pot, spoon, and soup bowl. That involves three plastic dish pans. A soap wash, a hot rinse, a cool rinse. But that's a lot of trouble. Now I use the blue water method, employed on cruising sailboats. The pot and soup bowl are swabbed out with a paper towel, then washed off enough so that nothing's visible. Next meal, a little water is boiled in the pot to sterilize it, then the soup bowl and spoon go in to sterilize them the autoclave method.

I try to work it out so they're no leftovers. The small amount of wet garbage goes into a compost bin set way off on the outskirts of the scatter, maybe on my land, maybe not. This is just an old metal water tank I found that had been thoroughly ventilated by marksmen. I haggled a hole in the top big enough to drop in garbage and covered the hole with a square board held down by a big rock. I glued some bug screening over some of the bullet holes and puttied the rest. The wilted veggies and black potatoes go in here to decompose at their leisure without being bothered by maggots. From the scat around the tank, I see the local mammals have checked it out but there's no way they can get at it and not much for them anyway.

Homesteaders are of two minds about visits by the local critters: the coyotes, bunnies, rats, and reptiles. The Hobo, for instance, encourages them to drop by. He buys 100-pound sacks of dog food to feed the coyotes. He likes to sit in his underground trailer and watch the animals through his periscope. Other homesteaders, like the Tukes, don't necessary want them, but get them any-

way because they keep birds. The coyote is interested in that chicken. The coon-tailed rattler wouldn't mind an omelet.

Boy Tukes was washing the dishes one afternoon when an overly bold coon-tailed rattler slithered in the backdoor of his trailer to check out the aviary, paused on the threshold, lifted its head inquisitively for a look around. Tukes, who is called Boy Quick by the Hobo, took off the snake's head with one swipe of the kitchen knife. J.R. was under a truck hammering on an axle when a six-foot gopher snake crawled right over him on its way toward the chicken coop. Alba the Dog Lady got frequent visits from snakes on the prowl for loose kittens and puppies. (She says she bends down over the puzzled rattlers, wagging her finger, and delivers a scripture-thick homily on godly behavior. Genesis, probably.)

As for me, I don't encourage trans- species visiting. I don't have pets or domestic fowl. I don't leave any food out. I've seen what happens when the rats get going in a trailer. Hanta virus aside, they're nasty. Kangaroo rats got into one of the Hobo's trailers while he was gone and bit into a couple of dozen cartons of soy milk and spoiled a lot of other food. Now he takes my advice. Put the grub in rat-proof plastic bins.

It isn't likely that Alba the Dog Lady has problems with rodents. She keeps about 30 cats in her trailer, so she probably doesn't need mice protection.

Clothing

Low couture for hard times.

Oh, what to wear? The Hobo always claims that a group of outlaw nudists periodically visits the valley wearing nothing but gun belts. I've never seen them and would be astonished if I did. This is not the place to expose delicate parts to the ultraviolet.

The Hobo's usual attire. Hobo's pants are held up with rope. He always wears ten-pound ankle weights.

Although, I have to say, when I attended the Burning Man Festival in Nevada's Black Rock Desert a few years ago I saw amazing feats of self-exposure. Nude guys riding bicycles at noon. Maybe they had on sunscreen, but the boys were otherwise blatantly heliotropic. Nude women had the sense to tote parasols that threw a pale of umber modesty across the tender areole.

My own strong feeling is that, under the desert blaze, the skin should be draped or wrapped like the corpus of a Roman senator. Of course, I'm the fair descendent of blue-eyed Brits of chilly climes and have ruddy skin that burns in sunlight. I've already had a couple of specks of skin cancer picked off my face. Yet I know that not all skin ages the same or suffers the same kind of sun-induced outrage. Naked Paul, who owns the bookshop in Quartzsite, seldom appears in public in more than a Speedo and a sombrero and no sunscreen. He has been in the desert for years (after his career in show biz) and he isn't a wizened lizard yet. His program at the bookstore is to sluice off under an outdoor shower every hour or so.

On the other hand, lots of fair skinned Norsky-ites from the tundra who winter in the desert find their dermatologist shaking his head: Basel cell carcinoma; squamas cell carcinoma; or the ace of spades of skin cancer, melanoma. Even if our cells don't go into disorganized rampage, those of us who frolic uncovered in the sun too long get inelastic leathery skin, parchment hands, and unwelcome wrinkles and liver spots that aren't going away short of cosmetic surgery.

Anyway, my own dress code is strict when out of doors at the Rancho: long pants, long sleeved shirt, lightweight space alien anti-sun gloves, big round hat, either geezer sunglasses with the flaps or motorcycle goggles, an attractive beard, zinc oxide on the tip of the nose, owl hoot bandana sometimes, and sunscreen splashed on like cologne in a Nevada cat house. I don't wear all of this every minute, but a lot of it I do if I'm out rambling for the day. Happily, in the remote Smoke Tree, eccentric dress seldom occasions remark. It's rare to stumble across a fellow creature, and if you do, his own ensemble probably won't allow much room for him to criticize yours. Around the scatter by myself, I may affect a Bedouin-like bathrobe or pajamas, just because it's comfortable and cool, plus they're easy to toss aside for the shower.

Other people out here aren't nearly as wussy about a little skin damage, and wear t-shirts or singlets, and baseball caps that don't cover the ear lobes. Beer-infused yahoos from LA careening around in their Jeeps could be wearing anything imaginable but frequently sport Luau shirts and tennis shorts.

The illegal immigrants that trudge through the sign-less waste trying to find the highway also may turn up wearing strange outfits, from a Tijuana woman in a tight-fitting cocktail dress and high heels to guys in flip-flops and no shirt or hat. They are forlorn spectral figures trudging erratically through the scrub with one gallon of water among them. The Border Patrol has asked the Smoke Tree residents not to abet these illegal crossings, but that's impossible. Plenty of them die out in the desert already, their bodies found curled, bloated and naked — they shed their clothes as their bodies swell — in the scant shade of a Palo Verde bush. The Hobo, whose property lies on an often-used route between the border and Interstate 10, gives them water and points them to the right road. Most of them turning up at his door are lost. They've been abandoned by their coyote and are crazy with thirst. They're confused by a skein of dirt roads, many of which lead nowhere. I've suggested to the Hobo that he ought to have on hand a Goodwill slop chest of shirts and hats, too, to go with the water and directions. My rancho apparently is off the route, and I've never seen any immigrants, but just in case I leave a sign and map in Spanish next to a water tank. *Potable water. Follow the arrows to the highway.*

Nobody else does this, but it makes sense to me on windy days when I'm out strolling, I wear the ski goggles and a dust mask. After a dust storm, the eyes always are red and sore. If you tie a white handkerchief around the mouth and nose, it'll be black in an hour. I've noticed something

in the old film clips on the History Channel about Rommel's troops in Africa: the soldiers riding side-car motorcycles through the blowing dust always wear goggles. Maybe I'm kidding myself, but I have the sense that I'm doing something to keep some of the fine talcum-y PM-10 dust out of my eyeballs and lungs.

What else for the well-appointed desert sojourner? Good boots, of course. Everybody seems to favor black guard-style boots. I've only seen a few rattlers on my property, because I have nothing interesting for them. Everybody else reports their presence in long serpentine Conga lines. The most common poisonous snake around here is the coon-tailed rattler, which the settlers consider to be sort of the Labrador Retriever of pit vipers — big, dumb, slow to get pissed off. The one they worry about is the Mojave sidewinder — small and sinuous, sneaky, and mean as a Republican. I don't think twice about pushing through the brush in a wash, but I'm glad enough to be wearing boots and long pants.

I have a small rucksack I take along when I leave the homestead, even if it's just for a short outing. The most important item is the quart of water (or a gallon if I plan to be gone more than a few hours). I carry binoculars, sunscreen, first aid kit, and a Colt .38, which I'll use to shoot myself if I break a leg and start to die of thirst. I also carry GPS and a compass and the local topo. I've never been lost-lost, since the mountains all around make prominent landmarks. But I've been subject to short-term confusion, particularly down in the washes. This is easily straightened out, usually, by taking a compass bearing. I have the coordinates of the homestead punched in on the GPS. So I just need to GO TO to find my way back. I do it for practice, but have never felt I needed it. Last but not least are the usual matches, energy bar, toilet paper, a square of plastic sheeting for shade, a signal flare, and a paperback. Nobody else bothers with any of this, but only a few of the homesteaders out here are big walkers.

Boy Tukes keeps his survival gear in an ammo box welded on his sand rail. Mystery Woman lives a very secluded and solitary life in her trailer a few miles from me, and I changed the orientation of the rifle range once I realized she was out there. She has the Sierra Club look: hiking shorts, sturdy boots, walking staff, and enormous shirt of many pockets. The Hobo usually carries a forty-pound pack everywhere he goes, but he's a sub teacher at the high school a few months per year, and when working in town, he dry camps in the washes or citrus orchards on the outskirts. Around his homestead, he might take off for a walk carrying nothing — not even water or a hat. He always wears ankle weights, though.

But it's not always hot in the Smoke Tree. Winters can be mild one day, Siberian the next. In an early weekend at the Rancho when a bunch from the *Orange County Register* had come out for shooting and rocketry, a cold snap and wind chill plunged the temp to something like Christmas in St. Petersburg. We were huddled like bums around a trash fire. But cold weather gear is easy because you don't really have the option of *not* wearing it: Layers. Wool. Windbreaker. Thick socks and gloves. Heavy watch cap. Wrap up in a blanket when you stop for a rest. The usual drill.

Winter or summer, I always lather on the sunscreen. My son says, "Excuse me. The sun isn't shining." I teach him, "The sun is *always* shining, Michael. It's you and I who are in the fog."

Chores

Any household, no matter how simple, demands a few chores. So get your sorry ass out of that hammock.

I tend to let things go. That's why at the Rancho I try to keep everything butt simple. Homesteaders like J.R. and the Tukes are always fussing with cars or generators, pulling a drive train, overhauling a motor and keeping busy, busy. Me, after the morning walk, I like to lie in the hammock and read a novel.

Still, a few things need to get done. I hope this isn't going to be a tedious homily. But with a paucity of amenities, the isolated desert homesteader who values leisure over busyness needs to be ingenious in figuring out the easiest way to accomplish the mundane chores of a household and the things that are kind of a drag.

Washing clothes, under ordinary circumstances, couldn't be simpler. I usually make a once-a-week trip into town for groceries. While I'm cruising the supermarket aisles, the clothes are tumbling at the Suds 'n' Duds Laundromat. But it could be, because of laziness or a flat wallet, that the week stretches into two or three before I hit town. Then I wash at home.

Happily, the homesteader's prosaic wardrobe doesn't require special care. True, a standard issue cotton shirt won't survive more than five or six washings in the brine that comes out of the ground out here. Despite that, I wash in the salt water from the desert well and rinse in the precious potable water that I haul from town. I use a big plastic tub and a small washboard I found at a garage sale. Believe me, I don't do this often. Drying is the tricky part, at least when the wind blows. If I hang the tee shirts and underwear outside on a line during a still day, they dry white. With even a whisper of wind, wet clothes can get pretty gritty. With the pants and jackets and outer shirts, who cares? The solution for underwear is to use one of those spindly wooden drying racks placed somewhere out of the wind.

Here's also the lazy way, my way, to wash clothes, if I'm driving somewhere. Put the clothes with water and a little soap in a bucket with a closed lid and take them along in the back seat. The agitating action of bumping over washboard dirt roads will have the clothes washed by the time you return. That's easier than the scrub board.

Another chore, kind of, is taking a moment to be a good steward to the land. No way to sugarcoat it, some of the homesteads out here look pretty trashy. Alba, the Dog Lady, lives in a trailer surrounded by ankle-deep dog shit from her dozen mutts. She has one travel trailer that houses thirty cats, summer and winter. Piles of splintered lumber, rusting junk, and indecipherable debris lie everywhere. She has an excuse, and you can guess what it is. Other homesteads aren't trashy per se but appear, at first glance, cluttered with cannibalized machinery. If one wanted to ask, one would learn that these dismantled cars in seemingly random array are all vital to work in progress, mainly the continued upkeep and maintenance of the various homestead dune buggies and sand rails. That's why so many of the junked cars scattered around are Volkswagens.

I have neither the mechanical nor the mental excuse. Because of the early use of the Rancho as a firing range, there's brass winking in the sun everywhere, although all the shotgun casings have been retrieved. A lot of the broken glass at the end of the pistol range now has been recycled into the sandbag house.

The biggest mess was the newspapers. A ferocious wind got under the pallets holding down the bundles of newspapers, and some of the bundles exploded. Newspapers blew everywhere. Blue Kmart ad supplements gaily hung from every thorn tree. Happily, in the prickly desert,

newspaper only went as far as the first plant it ran into. Even so, it took me most of a morning to undeliver the paper.

The other chore I tend to let go is cleaning the .22s. I like to sit in a chair in front of my house and plink at beer bottles. As the stern gunmen from LA explained to me over, and over, you shoot, you clean. To, often, I just plop the rifle against the wall and forget about it for a few days.

Security

Perimeter security for the desert homestead.

Oh, it doesn't take long, living in an isolated venue with spotty communications, to start to get just a lee-tle bit paranoid. You suddenly shoot up straight in bed at night, wide-awake, pulse lively. *What the hell was that?* It sounds like Ninja assassins scratching at the walls. It sounds like para-commando meth freaks baying for ephedrine. Nine-one-one? Forget it. Nobody's coming to help. The local deputy has gone home and the nearest cop on duty at night is three hours away, if he'd even come.

Whatever ghoulies and ghosties may be out there in the dark, you have to deal with alone. But what, realistically, is the actual threat level? Yes, there have been incidents out here. But none of them even remotely similar to an unprovoked weird Manson-type attack on the isolated homestead. Most of the crime out here involves unseen cowardly vandalism and skulking petty theft. The history of physical confrontation in the Smoke Tree easily breaks into two piles: deputy vs. citizen, and domestic squawk, in which I include the love triangle. Pretty much the same theme as in the rest of the world. Yet, being alone out in the boondocks, one starts to have these...thoughts.

People out here handle their paranoia in different ways. I'm not allowed to talk about the Demented Vet's arrangements, but J.R. would be an example of the Hollywood take on the desert homesteader. I like J.R. He's gruff and temperamental, but he's a believer in the desert ethos of open-handed hospitality if he feels you're being square with him. He's helped me out of jams, he'll do the same for anybody in trouble, and he's not looking for money for it. He's also heavily armed and suspicious. The perimeter around his compound is guarded by semi-feral dogs on breakaway twine leashes. If they lunge, they're free. The dogs live in holes scooped in the ground covered by boards. The approach of a visitor sets off a cacophony of howling. These dogs are not pets. The Hobo tried to make friends with one of the mutts and got bit for his trouble.

Now J.R. may have more reason than others for keeping a close watch. I can't say what he does now, but in the past he's run the adjoining gunnery range at the midnight hour in his Mad Max sand carts, scrapping brass and the aluminum tail fins from exploded ordnance. This would be... trespassing on much-posted government property. The Marines take the expected dim view. Not every dropped bomb goes off, you know. (A), the Marines don't want anybody to come to grief with unexploded ordnance, and (B), they certainly don't want anybody waltzing off with a live bomb.

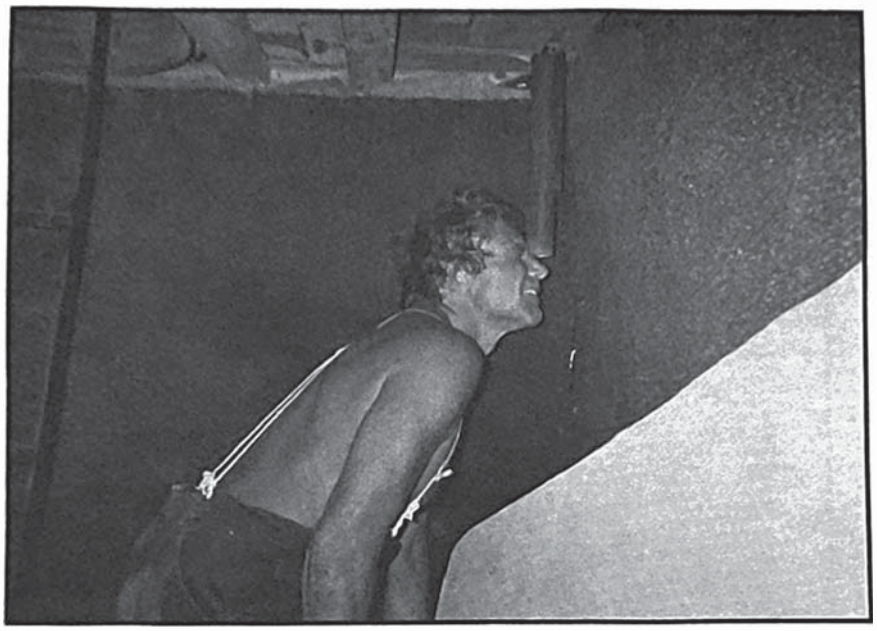
In any case, like I say, I don't know what J.R.'s doing right now, but in the past he's had a lot of scrap in his backyard that has value both at the salvage yard and for gun buffs who want to reload .50 caliber brass. I mean, he had 55-gallon drums filled with .50s. A shed full of aluminum. Some money there. He believes that in the past uninvited guests have helped themselves, and he doesn't want that happening again. Also, to be scrupulously accurate, you'd probably have to say

his menacing demeanor is partly a stance to give pause to the nosey inquiries of officious bureaucrats. J.R.'s home security is pretty tight by suburban standards and would live up to a movie version of Billy Bob Thornton hunkered down in the bunker.

The Hobo descending into his underground trailer.

On the obverse side of the security coin is the Hobo. He has elected to leave the fate of himself and his gear to Providence. The Hobo puts his trust in the general benignity of human nature. Statistically, he's right of course. Sure, some people are well sediment, but the overwhelming majority doesn't want to break your skull or take your TV. So he has the actuarial view. The crash of a commercial jetliner will always make the news but flying's still the safest way to travel. People always mention Indian Phil's shootout with the deputy, but they never mention the endless boring days when nothing untoward happens. Thus, the Hobo takes no security precautions for his personal safety. Even though he sleeps out alone in the desert almost every night, he doesn't even own a firearm. He's got to be the only unarmed person in the Smoke Tree.

Well, now that I think about it, the Hobo *has* made it more difficult for a thief to mess with his trailers. The couplers are disabled so the trailers can't be hooked up and hauled away. Some of his caches of water and gasoline are buried. Most of the trailers also are anchored with airplane cable, but that's more because of the wind than out of concerns about thievery.



The Hobo peers through a homemade periscope inside his buried trailer. Access to the underground trailer is through a cut-out 55-gallon barrel. The periscope inside allows him to monitor the coyotes and other wildlife attracted by the dog kibble in an adjacent feeder.

Cherokee, "the Honest Engine," owns the sprawling junk ranch. The items found there are for sale. They are not meant to be picked over gratis by the casual passerby. Those who do go cruising through the junk without permission and directions probably will get a flat tire because the junk ranch is mined with tacks and buried four-point barbed wire. Although this wasn't a studied precaution, the junk ranch, because of the low-lying shade it offers, also has become a gala resort for rattlers. That's why the Honest Engine, when he's stopping out there, sleeps atop a pile of seven mattresses.

The Tukes family holds to an intermediate road. They feel basically that, as long as somebody's home, nothing will go missing. Mom Tukes says their place has been burglarized, and she knows who did it, but that happened only once when everybody was away. They have a bunch of pet dogs that do plenty of barking when you drive up. Their laager of trailers sits high up a bare hillside with a panoramic overview of the surrounding plain. The only approach is over a tortuous dirt road carved out of the hillside. There've been some incidents at the Tukes homestead, including a scuffle and shooting involving the boyfriend and ex-boyfriend of a Tukes daughter. The deputies came out one time with a warrant to look for an alleged still that if it existed, they couldn't find. The deputies also came out another time to ask about the registration on a trailer.

Like I hinted, a lot of the so-called theft in the Smoke Tree has its roots in misunderstandings. Is that trailer, which has been sitting out there in the sunshine unoccupied for two years, abandoned... or not? Didn't old Mr. Coot *say* we could have these water tanks after he died? I've re-

cycled plenty of junk I've found on abandoned homesteads without bothering to ask permission of the heirs. It's kind of a judgment call... but anything that looks like it might have any actual *value* I leave alone. Personally, I've always felt that the biggest worry in the Smoke Tree is not theft or ninja attacks from meth loons, but the mindless vandalism of drunked-up quad-riding yahoos from LA who happen on your place when you're not home.

So what do I do? I have a different strategy. Mainly, I leave nothing of value at the Rancho. When I'm off traveling, I take everything of any possible interest and put it in a little storage locker in town. There's nothing left at the Rancho worth more than a couple of bucks that couldn't be easily replaced at the next garage sale. The dirt cheap Rancho itself, basically, is just Spanky's club house. Sandbags and crapboard, cardboard and newspaper bales. Even if some idiot put himself to the trouble of razing the whole thing, it's not like... a monetary loss. The loss would be in sweat equity, and not much of that. The biggest pain in the ass for me would be if some cretin shot up my 100-gallon water tanks. Even so, the tanks only cost ten bucks used at the Oasis Water Company in Blythe.

As for personal safety when I'm out at the Rancho by my lonesome? Okay, I am a little bit paranoid. I can't be as blissfully trusting as the Hobo, even though he has the actuarial facts behind him. I put my faith in a short-barreled pump shotgun loaded with buck. I don't want to say exactly how the compound's laid out, but I designed the Rancho so that it's possible to cover the approach to the inner courtyard from a point near the doorway, a point which is fortified with sandbags on all sides and overhead. My old pal Gordon, mocking me, calls the setup "a perp weir," since it's meant to funnel an intruder into a kill zone. Frankly, this so-called security scheme is hallucinatory madness, and I'm kidding myself to think that it offers any realistic protection. Despite that, I sleep easier at night believing that I have a plan.

My madness didn't end there, though, and it's because I have a lot of spare time at the Rancho for thinking up cute ideas. I also tried setting up perimeter trip wire, since I didn't have any dogs; this would serve the same purpose as early warning mongrels although it's far less reliable than Fido. I got the idea from the Demented Vet who showed me a picture in one of his old Army manuals. I used a simple switch made from a clothespin. (The illustration shows it clearly. The trip wire is attached to a pin that goes between the lips of the clothespin. If the pin is jerked out by somebody tripping over the line, the clothespin brings together two wrapped wires, closing a circuit to a 12-volt battery and a car horn.) It worked when some accommodating friends tested it at the Rancho by obligingly bumbling into the wire, but I don't put much faith in it.

Guinea hens would be better. In Shasta County, I've seen homesteaders use these speckled chickens as watch fowl. The mountain inhabitants say the chickens are better than dogs (which may doze off) and have the added advantage of being aggressive with rattlesnakes. Yeah, but then, you wind up being a chicken farmer with chores to do.

In reality, there's little crime to worry about because of the population dearth. No people, no crime. On the other hand (and here's where the paranoia comes in), if anything *does* happen... you're on your own. No help will come. It's the premise of many B-movies.

Women & Sex

The author broaches a delicate subject.

But, um, what about women and sex? Not everybody wants to live like a monk. It's good to take an unblinking look at sex at the Rancho, because it could be a problem. Obviously, out in

the desert waste, few opportunities exist to "meet people," or to "hook up," or to get laid for that matter. And as far as imports, women in general are going to look askance at the accommodations offered by a sandbag hogan and the junk trailer (and I am putting aside here any considerations about the occupant). Who knows? You might find adventurous young college girls willing to try anything once. But, in general, a regular woman is going to ask right off the bat, "Is there a shower?" by which she means a shower like the one in her apartment. It's an irrational shibboleth on the part of womanhood, but the lack of traditional plumbing seems to be the biggest obstacle to luring females out to the middle of nowhere.

It boils down to this. If the homesteader hopes to find a companion to share his idyllic life in the sand, the prospective companion probably will have to be mentally different from the pack and somehow immune to the implacable propaganda of the culture. She could be an enviro with a kindling passion to put her cafeteria commando, advanced seminar blather about appropriate technology and earth friendly living into practice. I've never seen one out here, but it seems possible. She could be a naturally reclusive bibliophile who wants unlimited time to devote herself to literature. I've never seen that either.

Usually, the critic of the desert homestead life, the distaff one, says she couldn't handle the hardships. It's perspective, darling. From my walnut shell, it seems like infinite space. I feel no hardships weighing on me. My own perception is that I spend a lot of time in pleasant loafing. Onerous chores? I have none. Nobody tells me what to do. When something gets onerous, like the 20th sandbag, I quit for the day. What is the cruel hardship? That I have to haul the drinking water once a week? On the way out of Blythe with the groceries, I stop at the city park and load 60 gallons from the public hose in fifteen minutes. I would rather do this than be bored comatose at a staff meeting, so it's not a hardship, comparatively.

"But an... *outhouse*," she says. The Rancho shitter, if I may brag, is as clean and sweet as any facility you'll find, and it's not right next to the bedroom either, if you know what I mean. The shaded outdoor shower and bath rival anything in a spa with water warmed by living sunshine. The real hardship for the critic — and I understand this — is in not being close to shopping and a *cappuccino*. I don't count this as physical hardship.

Most of the actual women who live on the homesteads out here are of the tough practical pioneer breed, or nuts, but they all seem to share a love of animals and contempt for urban life. The only limit on a menagerie out here is the amount of water you're willing to haul each week. Keep teams of dogs, reams of cats, fowl of every feather, and maybe a horse, donkey and mule. Animal lovers can be happy, if celibate.

Maybe the best choice for the on-going sexual liaison is to have the love interest ensconced someplace else — in town, in her own place, with her own nine-to-five life, and to visit her on weekends. She'll probably be glad to see you and glad to see you go. Maybe it's just me, but it seems like a lot of women really don't want men around all that much during the week anyway unless they need a jar opened or a window cleaned. They want us available, on call, but not under foot. I'm not a student of marriage, but my cursory observation has been that long-term couples seem to thrive best when they give each other lots of sea room. I admit I've seen the opposite, too, but it seems rarer. An item at close quarters, cheek by jowl, day after day, particularly if they're under some emotional or financial duress, will soon be quarrelling. It's inevitable he'll be silent and distant, she'll be a nag...

On the other hand, what about two more or less equal and independent people who go their own way during the traditional five-day work Sabbath and then meet up on Saturday to have dinner and smooch? That might not only be a lot of fun but also the foundation for a Capital R interaction. I know your objection. The second law of thermodynamics — Entropy — and you're

right. Eventually, somebody is going to want more out of it and start making the succession of demands that are like the keening funeral dirge. So I don't know the answer. I'm just saying that, for the desert homesteader, the squeeze in town might be a workable solution for the topic under discussion.

Chapter Twelve
Don't Do It

Consumer warning. This is what happens after living awhile in a homemade sandbag hogan in the desert. You start sounding like the Demented Vet.

I don't expect many people actually to do any of this. To give up a regular life and live in the wilderness. I just point out that you could and that it's possible for a mope with no skills and no money to disengage from his assigned slot and walk away from his pod for a life in which he no longer takes orders. But it's also a metaphor and daydream meant to appeal to the marginalized. You know the type. Maybe you're one of 'em. The played-out geezers, pimply illiterate punks, useless cripples, vets on a stump, wetbacks on a bicycle, the multitudinous square pegs of all girths, and all other superfluous supernumeraries who sort of dimly see that they have been bred by the culture to be the creatures of their betters; simps, simpletons, Prufrocks, monkey paws of the higher orders, low men on the pole, last peckers in the pecking order, the privates in the rear rank, the most ordinary of the seamen, the ruck, the commonality, the herd. *You*, in other words.

Let's review. You're fucked. Face it, you're screwed. You got no chance. This world isn't made for you. The world is made for better looking, smarter people. Your place is to serve in a menial capacity for a pittance. You're not the Pharaoh. You're the brick maker. Your lot in life is to cringe before your superiors, beg for a three percent raise, sweat out the rent or the mortgage.

All your desires and wants are guided and molded by the media. Other people tell you what you want, what to wear, what movie to see or CD to buy. Okay, you're allowed to posture. Go ahead, pierce your tongue. Subscribe to *Rolling Stone*. That's so daring. Now fetch my *latte*. *That's* your place and worth in the marketplace. To fetch. You think plunking that guitar will help you? You have no talent or marketable skills. You don't understand money or finance. You'll never be on stage, or an actor in Hollywood, or make a film, or do anything successful for that matter.

Are you man enough to look at this? Serf, villain, vassal, stoop labor, hired hand, faceless widget, common mope. Your little dream is what? To own your own home? You pathetic fool. A crushing mortgage for a stucco eyesore forty miles from your job in some loser's ghetto, paid for in blood daily with a nightmare commute through stinking air, tailed by testosterone-fueled gangsters hanging on your bumper. "Well how about the tax advantages? The interest rate deduction?" You simp. You're mired for life. The government has you right where it wants you with its boot on your neck. You're not going anywhere now. They know they can count on you.

Where's the mope? "Right where he should be, your honor, forehead spot-welded to the tube, making his quota, paying his mortgage and your taxes. Yes, your honor, he's a good lad."

Leisure? Two weeks — a year. Fourteen days out of 365. And you go where you're told. *"This looks like fun, honey. Cancun."* Packaged, stamped, delivered, a lockstep ramble with the souvenir peddlers, a pastel drink with an umbrella, and then back to the last.

There's no way out. To escape takes a lot more courage than you have. You've been groomed from birth to step into the hierarchy at the low end as a cookie cutter doughboy programmed to curtsey and say, "How can I help?" One with the American Borg. The conditioning in school, the incessant propaganda ("How can you expect to get a good job if you don't study?"), it's too much to resist. You say you don't believe it? Try saying this: "I would give up my television and all my favorite programs in exchange for my freedom." Or, "I would give up my car and my paid vacations if I could have real leisure." Or, "I would give up electricity, refrigeration, restaurants, movies, CD players, cell phone, Nikes, hot showers, if I could have my life back." You can't say it. Nobody can say it because... ah...

Shit. I can't do this. I'm trying to be indignant. Write a screed or a tirade, in imitation of the DV. Can't. Too many bubbles in my batter. I'm made of the low elements on the periodic table. Hydrogen and helium. I'm too indolent and easy going to be a rabble rouser. I don't even like the rabble.

My purpose in the desert isn't sack cloth or hair shirts or ascetic escape from the world's evil blandishments. I like a lot of the world's evil blandishments. I just built a shack out here to beat the rent and to goof off reading novels.

Sure, I have a little indignation in me, but I blow it off every morning during my "Ten Minutes of Hate" while I read the newspaper. I don't carry it around all day. Live and let live. If my work-a-daddy friends in the city don't mind subsidizing cotton farmers and hobby ranchers and oil moguls, and the likes of me, hey, my nose won't peel. I try to mimic the DV's hissing slit-eyed oratory, but I know I'm lame. He's had years of the relentless maddening desert wind to help him polish his rant. You can hear the sibilant seething Mariah in the background when he talks. And he never leaves the desert, while I'm always back in the culture getting fresh infusions of propaganda.

So I admit I'm not the McCoy like the DV, or J.R. or the Tukes, or even the Hobo, who's out in the tempting world a lot too. I'm still the dilettante observer with half a toe in the pond. I built my Our Gang clubhouse in the desert to ensure I'll have my own quarters. But I'm too much of the Borg to spend the whole year isolated out here with the desert wind.

First Try

A trip back in time to look at the Amenity-less Horror.

Rancho Costa Nada isn't my first attempt to break the shackles of traditional adult responsibility. There was also the Amenity-less Horror. Twenty years ago, while working for the *Los Angeles Times* in San Diego, I sold a novel to the movies. Actually, a producer at MGM optioned an unpublished novel and hired me to write the screenplay. It was one of those countless Hollywood option deals. Nothing ever hit the silver screen. But I got $60,000. So I quit my job.

I already owned two and a half acres in remote Lassen County, way out in the boonies in the northeast corner of California. I'd purchased the land for $2,000 a few years before as an ace in the hole, a place to fall back on while between jobs. Now in the chips, I figured I'd build a cabin, live frugally (except that my first purchase had been an airplane), and eke by on the option

money for two or three years. After quitting the *Times*, I started right in on the cabin, building it in sections in my back yard in San Diego.

Planning. Looking back, I see now the project overreached my skills. But at that time I was reckless and thought big. I decided to make the cabin 12' by 24'. It was to be made of 4' by 8' panels stuffed with insulation. I'd truck the panels in a U-Haul up north and assemble them on the site. The panels were made of quarter inch plywood on one side and phony pine interior wallboard on the other with batts between the two-by-four studs. A few of the panels had little Plexiglas windows and one panel had an undersized door. It took me three or four days in the backyard to knock the panels together on a jig. Each panel was light enough that I wouldn't need help setting them up — kind of like the concept of a split rig on a sailboat.

As *concept,* this wasn't too bad, although as my brother-in-law was kee-rect in saying, it would have been a lot easier and cheaper to buy a used trailer in Redding. Even so, this was before wood prices went through the roof, and I bought all the materials on sale at a discount lumberyard for under $500.

A road didn't actually touch my property but that summer, as luck would have it, a speculator had bladed a path through the rocks and juniper that came petty close. Toward the end of August, I unloaded the panels on the ground I figured I probably owned. The first winter rains obliterated this trace path, and from then on I had to walk half a mile from the pavement to get to my new home. In a way, this was good, because I figured no county bureaucrat would walk that far just to tag me for not having permits.

I based part of my cabin plan on some of the board-and-batten shacks I'd seen built by dope growers in Humboldt County next to their gardens. I'd been looking in on the growers while doing a story about that lucrative kind of farming for the *Times*. Basically, the foundations for these dwellings came from native rock piled in more or less level heaps. My property, set at 4,000 feet near the tiny village of Little Valley, grew rocks like crazy. The soil abounded with a treasure quarry of foundation material.

Building. I set some floor joists on the rock piles and got everything more or less level. The floor panels, by the way, were exactly like the wall panels, except that I used half-inch plywood. After the floor panels were down on the rock piers and toe-nailed together, I started raising the wall, panel by panel, and then tied them together with a double layer of two-by-fours. I got some 12-foot roof beams from the local yard and laid the roof panels on top. The result was... a rectangular box. I had no idea how to make a pitched roof, which I kind of needed, since Lassen County gets plenty of rain and snow in the winter.

About this time a lean, fifty-ish figure in coveralls came strolling through the woods. My next-door-neighbor heard the hammering from his place half a mile away. He takes in the Horror at a glance, and obviously he didn't want to insult me but....

The upshot was... the next Saturday, a bunch of local guys came over and set a pitched roof on the cabin. The neighbor already had told me what I needed to get: a bunch of rough one-inch lumber from the local sawmill plus some rolls of tarpaper and felt roofing. In a few hours, they'd roughed out the trusses and all I had to do at my leisure was nail on the boards and the roofing material. Thanks to them, the Horror at least shed snow and didn't let in water. In fact, my son and I went back ten years later to inspect the long-abandoned shack to find it still water-tight and dry inside.

Because of the expected cold winter, I'd made the door and windows very small, the better to keep in heat. The Goodwill furniture I'd brought along wouldn't have fit through the door so I built the house around the chairs and tables and couch. Winter *was* bitter cold, but the little sheet

metal stove burned so hot that I'd have to kick the door open after about 15 minutes in the morning.

The Amenity-less Horror, of course, lacked running water, plumbing, and electricity, although I did have a little Honda generator. I carried in fresh water five gallons at a time. The kitchen was a propane stove. A three-gallon garden sprayer provided the shower. My son, then five, was staying with me, and he enjoyed treading through the snow for exactly one day. After that, I had to carry him in to. I kept my two-seat Cessna 150 at the little field in Fall River Mills, 15 miles down a curvy mountain road, and I'd fly him into San Francisco every few weeks to see his mom. We also flew over to the little town of Ruth, to the Flying Double "A" Dude Ranch to go on hayrides. We also went to the blissed-out, guru-heavy ashram of Shasta to see my girl friend.

The Lumbees. Eventually, I went broke, sooner than expected. When the time came to move on, I sold the acres to what I thought was the Lumbee Indian tribe for pretty much what I had in it: $3,500. I'd got a letter saying the tribe wanted to consolidate all the parcels and build a Lumbee museum and RV park. It turned out, though, the Lumbees were kind of fictive. A real Indian, a woman from the Pit River tribe, had created the Lumbees as a money-maker. The saw mill in Little Valley had gone belly up, and the former employees had burned through their unemployment. By purchasing memberships in the Lumbee tribe from the Pit River woman for $25, they became eligible for a commodities giveaway and also for free health care at the Indian clinic. The ex-saw mill workers weren't exactly Indians per se. They were more like Caucasians. The Pit woman asked only that an applicant testify on the membership form that he was at least a fifth part Lumbee. She used the honor system.

The interesting part, though, was that the light-eyed Lumbees found they liked being Indians. They started having Pow Wows and taking Indian names. My next door neighbor Frank overnight became Gray Eagle. They bought ponies, dressed up in buckskin and feathers, and went on rides in the backcountry. The new-minted brave passed on Indian lore to the papoose, and they all rode as the Lumbee Tribe in the Lassen County Fair parade. Well, most of the people around there dressed like cowboys, but this bunch dressed like Indians. But as far as I know they never got around to the museum or the RV park.

Nor did any Lumbee take up residence in the cabin. What a nostalgic day we had when a decade later my son and I returned to look it over. It was just as we had left it, with the door unlocked. Big Bird still sat in the rocking chair. A squad of my son's Star War guys lined up in the two-story playhouse I'd built inside. Fasces of kindling were next to the metal stove. The bunk beds had become a love nest for the mice, and some critters had powdered the kitchen floor with a bag of flour. But no human had stepped inside since the day we walked off through the woods with our backpacks. After ten winters, I couldn't see any water damage inside. The rocks I'd piled for the foundation hadn't slipped. The Horror had withstood the savagery of Nature better than I had.

Conversations with the Demented Vet, VI

"When you drive in here, Phil, could you keep the speed down? I know you love to hotrod that Geo. But five miles per hour would be good. You know what's-her-name doesn't appreciate dust

in the house. We don't have air conditioning filters *on the windows, Phil, because we like to be able to* see out the windows. *At least you can still see the mountains out here. Have you been to Bangkok lately? Smog like bunker oil. It's not air, it's battery acid. You have to wipe the axle grease off your face every ten minutes. It'll be the same here pretty soon. It's an air sewer already, Phil. All of Southern California. The San Joaquin Valley from Bakersfield to Stockton. Smog-olla. The Bay Area? Purple haze, and not from the hash pipe. The wind over Lake Arsenic in the Owens Valley blowing fine-haired poison right down in the auricles. And* this *fucking dust bowl here. You think the air out here is sweet? This is talcum, Phil, the kind of dust that sifts right down to the bottom of the old lung bag. Silicosis. PM10 up the gazoo. I hate it when the wind's southerly. We're getting all the dried up vaporized pesticide from the Palo Verde Valley, from 100 years of the valley squires drenching their cotton and alfalfa with poisonous shit and gassing all the melons. Not getting any better.*

"We shit on the Kyoto Protocol. Doesn't matter. Nobody wants to do anything about dirt air anyway, or the orchard house effect either. Any granddad in this nation would gladly sacrifice his little grandkids on a pyre rather than give up his truck. I know I ain't givin' up mine. And a billion Chinese coming on line with Korean-war refrigerators leaking Freon like an incontinent cancer victim. A billion cows in Argentina and Brazil farting in tune. And everybody breeding like rabbits. There's no hope. It's too late. We're behind the curve. We've had it. Kaput, finito. And it's a good thing, Phil.

"Consciousness. It was one of Nature's experiments. Uber *instinctual self-awareness. It didn't work out. Lot to be said for it. We got the Michelangelo and the Schubert, but with 'em came six billion ignorant superstitious narrow-minded greedy morons. Four billion more mouths to feed by tomorrow afternoon. It's hard to explain anything complex to an Irishman, particularly when he's eating free French fries somebody else cooked, but I'm gonna make the effort. See, nature tries all kinds of different evolutionary expedients. Fecundity in fleas. Wings for little dinosaurs. Fish that walk from puddle to puddle. Speed for the gazelle, more speed for the cheetah. Bipedalism. Opposed thumb. And then, ta da, brainpower. That experiment backfired and already's fucking up the whole planet. But meanwhile you (to an extent) and I and everybody else are the beneficiaries. All of a sudden, just a little while ago, we woke up. Consciousness.* I'm me. *Even if you're totally weak minded, Phil, as you are, even if you're a bead rattler who believes in UFOs, reincarnation, newspapers and that water can turn into Gallo, still, by complete blind accident, by dumb-ass lucky fluke, every last one of us undeserving Homo Saps, no matter how big a retard, got this amazing gift. No, it's a* huge *deal, Phil. Uber-instinctual self awareness. I said uber-instinctual. It's one of Nature's dead-end experiments, Phil. Pretty soon some slate cleaner of our own making will return what's left of the stricken planet to the cockroaches. But meanwhile, until you get the taste of copper in your mouth, you can* ergo cogito *all over the fucking place. You don't need to be a big shot or brainiac. Even you can sit on your pile of sandbags and contemplate the universe. But do you think people are grateful for this? Are people overwhelmed by the magnitude of this? Do they* get *what Whitman was talking about? Fuck no. They narcotize themselves with bud or Weiser because consciousness makes them miserable. Or they dream up more ways to cause trouble for the fellow saps.*

"Thank God *we're not taking our nastiness elsewhere. Thank God, Phil, for 186,000 miles per second. The speed limit, Phil, that's what's going to put the brakes on the* sapismo *explosion. Do you realize we're not even going to get as far as Mars? I can tell you with absolute certainty that a human being will never set foot on Mars.* Too expensive. *We've blown the wad on tax cuts and farm subsidies for corporate plutocrats; we've blown the wad on chasing around after a dozen hand-wiping ragheads. No dough left in the till for a ticket to Mars. And that's good. Waste of*

fucking money. NASA can spend a few bucks on what they're good at: sending robots into deep space to see what we can find out. The plutocrats already looked at Mars, and said fuck it. What's in it for me? Can't make any money off Mars. Give me some more subsidies for growing cotton nobody wants. And as far as homo sap ever getting to the stars? *Forget it.*

"We'll choke ourselves to death in our own BO first. Have you been down the hill lately? After you leave Chiriaco Summit and look down toward Palm Springs? You don't want to drive into that crap. I smoke cigarettes, and I don't want to breathe that crap. Unless there's a major die off right now to get the sap pop down... I mean, like, say AIDS and Ebola shake hands and go airborne... it's too late for the human race. We'll breed ourselves under. You know that Blythe High School has child care now? That tells the story. Fifteen-year-old moms. We're churning the population every fifteen years. Even if everybody wanted *to be good, use the bus, drive your piece-of-shit Metro, consume less, eat recycled bottles, stop farting... it's still too late. And nobody's gonna be good.* I'm not. *I got to have gasoline and lots of it. Okay, you're pretty good. You've got that toy car, you don't have a refrigerator or an air conditioner, but I gotta be frank with you, Phil, people think you're a weirdo.* I *think you're a weirdo, for living in that pile of sandbags. But even if everybody got as weird as you, it's still too late. Too many greed-bag light eyes in SUVs, too many dusky folks clamoring for their own refrigerators and color TVs. Everybody on the planet wants a car. Fuck the bicycle. You were just in Vietnam. Did you see it? Every kid in Saigon has a motor scooter. Next he's gonna get a car. The countryside everywhere is being raped and the city is gagging on dirt air. When I went up north last year to see my idiot cousin... clear cuts and slash on every hillside. The spots I used to fish for steelhead on the Eel when I was a kid? Trashed. Boise Cascade cut every tree right down to the water line. The banks are sloughing dirt, the river is silt. It's like Honduras. Tegucigalpa. Whole nabes sliding into the river. Trout fishing in Northern California is over, because of logging. But hey, I'm another one. Sometimes I gotta have a two-by-four. Because I'll be Goddamned if I'll ever fill a sandbag again. Twenty-two years in the Army, Phil. I've filled a few, you know. Never again. A trailer, Phil. That's what people live in out here. Not a sandbag."*

Chapter Thirteen
Summation

So what was this all about again?

People always say the same thing. "Phil, I couldn't be a desert homesteader. I need a hot shower every day." "Hot shower" here stands for modern plumbing. Hey, I'm not a proselytizer. I realize that only a handful of zanies and misanthropes would ever throw over the bourgie conveniences and light out for the desert territory. I don't have any stats, but just from an empirical view, I'd say most working stiffs look happy enough with their lot, or at least accept it. "Decent job, good bennies, don't knock it," says my sister. "House in a good nabe. Kids doin' okay in school."

I *don't* knock it. On the other mitt, I've seen plenty of guys who hate their life, see themselves as circling the drain, but they feel powerless and can't think what to do. Any change is risky. So they're willing to give up their volition, debase themselves with routinized shitwork, be bossed around by others their whole lives, all in exchange for a hot shower.

Been there. Like nearly every other mope on the planet, I've toiled (maybe not toiled, but reluctantly served) in the hierarchy, answering to dicks, taking the program. I am usually discontented, because I hate taking orders, even wise, sensible orders. Instruction irritates me. I don't want a mentor or guide. I'd rather fuck it up by myself. Even out in the desert, where obviously I need tutelage, I balk when the Hobo gives me good advice. *Panel screws work better than nails in this cedar.* Oh, yeah? I'm peeved. I do it my way, fail, and then wind up taking advantage of the well-meant, sound suggestion.

Obviously I have some deep-seated issue about authority. But anyway, at the homestead I don't *have* to take advice. I'm not an employee. I'm not a salaried associate answering to pigmies. Fuck those diminutive carnivores. I'm an unfettered guy who doesn't have to pull my weight. Sure, now I have to get by without much money, but I'm never broke. I'm not in *pinched circumstances.* I have walking around money, I've just had to pare expenses.

My spot in what the Hobo calls Sand Valley isn't much. Wind-beaten, barren desolation. Waterless dirt and thorny scrub. Actual value: worthless. But it's real property and in Samland, real estate is king. You're a piss-poor excuse for an American if you don't own a chunk of your own dirt. Property ownership is just about the highest aspiration of any son or daughter of Sam. Property ownership might even get you some respect before the bench, maybe. And you may as well take advantage of prevailing mores of the country you live in. In American civil justice, property

rights trump. *Deed uber alles.* The body of U.S. law supports and protects the owner of real property and chattel over the whining, leveling, egalitarian communard, however righteous.

The law-abiding desert crank or recluse sitting on his own acre quietly polishing his political theories, but bugging no one, probably sits immune to official lather. Nobody bothers the DV. The now-incarcerated Indian Phil, with his tire dump, pushed the envelope. Ditto for the speed cookers. But you know this from your own observation in suburbia: the home mechanic with half a dozen junk cars in his front yard; the eccentric little old lady whose house reeks from accumulated rubbish; the grumpy pet owner with the vicious howling rotweiller leashed on a stake next to the sidewalk: That part of civic majesty charged with abating nuisances moves slowly against private property, even in gross cases of abuse.

I sing the deed. I sing the outright purchase. I sing *Paid in Full.* The landowner who owns his piece in simple fee, deed in pocket, cannot be tossed out in the street with his furniture and suitcase like a pathetic renter or the bankrupt failure with a mortgage in arrears. Even if for some reason a landowner declines to pungle up his property taxes, why it still takes YEARS for the county to call the auctioneer. The county doesn't want that hassle. They just want the dough. Most of the parcels at that auction where I acquired the Rancho were *ten years* behind on taxes.

There's a real estate agent out in the Smoke Tree who sells parcels. He operates out of the trunk of his car. It's a $200 down, $100 a month deal. That's one way, and for some maybe the only way, but the cost for a worthless parcel similar to mine turns out to be around $750 an acre. I think you would be much better to nose around the plates at the assessor's office. Get the names of owners of worthless stuff; work the phone, make ridiculous lowball offers and see what happens, or try the tax auction.

Anyway, when building starts, I suggest something modest. Something Walden-sized. I think Thoreau's cabin on the lake was like 16′ x 10′. Nothing fancy, particularly if you're gonna bug out for long stretches. I'm too restless to spend whole months sequestered in one remote locale, no matter how homey. So I also arranged a mostly rent-free *pied-a-terre* closer to town.

Like I mentioned earlier, the Bureau of Land Management, at the same time that it sells out the public interest to corporate loggers, hobby ranchers, and Canadian mining interests, also offers the Norsky snowbirds an almost-free place to alight during the ice-bound northern winter. These RV corrals are called "Long Term Visitor Areas," and they are a great deal. Spotted around the southern deserts, the LTVAs give the wanderer with a self-contained RV or trailer up to eight months (September through April) of usually amenity-less (except for garbage pickup) camping on public land for the quite reasonable sum of $125. That's a goddamn bargain. Sure, you have to haul your own water both ways, yet hundreds of thousands of geezer Norskies are glad to do this. Nearby parks and rest stops are set with sanitary dumps and water spigots. Dump the crap and fill the tanks. The Swedes and Norwegians from Bismarck and Fargo don't seem to consider this much of a hardship, compared to... winter.

My brother-in-law gave me an old 30-foot trailer that was rusting away in his company's corporation yard. He'd bought it for his laborers to use on out-of-town projects, but it turned out they preferred Motel 6. I gutted part of the inside to make more room, got rid of the fridge and the stove, and moved the refurbed trailer out to a LTVA outside Blythe, while I was still indentured at the Blythe paper. Having a pad there also puts me within a couple of hours of Palm Springs.

Don't forget the nomadic element that comes with the rent-free homestead. An advantage of not having an overseer and a cubicle is that one is at liberty to travel. Accrued vacation days? Unlimited. That's good, because by June, the dirt cheap desert homestead is starting to get

toasty. By July the thermometer tacked to the hogan wall may be registering 120° F. Right, most of the other homesteaders in the Smoke Tree are year-round residents. They tough out the summer without a murmur, riding out the sweltering, breathless afternoons watching Oprah under the evap coolers. *Hot, ain't it?* I've never heard that.

I got entranced with the idea of *sandbags* by doing that newspaper story about the Persian architect. Most dirt cheap desert homesteaders, except for the Idaho survivalists, probably will find the sandbag idea a little too much. For most settlers the trailer continues to be the core of the desert homestead. But a plywood shack, built with whatever scrounged materials come to hand, is just as good, as long as the building is tight enough to keep out snakes and rodents.

A little tin box or wood shack in the desert can get stifling inside, and I approve any plan to divert the wind inside. I tried a wooden wind scoop, which worked, but which was soon demolished by a summer boxcar (as was the heat chimney). Anything chimney-like that sticks up from the dwelling may not last long in the stiff desert breeze, particularly, as in my case, when it's guyed with bailing wire rather than with cable. On the other hand, a cloth wind scoop, the kind found on cruising sailboats, works just as well. This scoop is suspended from a pole nailed to the north side of the house and leads into the clerestory window. Incidentally, since dust is a constant nuisance, I put air conditioning filters on the windows facing the prevailing breeze.

I also recommend some version of the bum box for sleeping outdoors on still, airless nights. This is just a sleeping platform elevated four feet off the ground, open on top to the starry sky, but enclosed on three sides by plywood (or crapboard) panels. If the homesteader only plans to use it on airless nights, he can skip the wind protection.

The desert bum box. A dumpster mattress atop pallets and tires makes a motel room for vagrants and hobos traversing the desert. The windbreak helps a little. Can be comfortable but check carefully for snakes before using

Bum box at the Rancho. Safely out of the reach of rattlers.
I bunked here while I knocked together the hogan.

For me, the acronym KISS pretty much sums up the reigning philosophy. I keep everything butt simple. I tried some cute ideas; most of them didn't work, or turned out not to be needed. The basics are shade and wind protection. Most of my time on the homestead I spend outdoors or under the *ramada*, but when the wind's howling you need a place to hide, to cook a dirt-free meal, and to be able to lie down without being covered with sand.

Keeping it simple not only suits my abilities but also my character. At heart, I'm an idler and a daydreamer, and I don't really want to keep busy. I like to lie in the hammock and read a book. I like to sit on a plastic chair in front of my door and pop beer bottles with a .22. I like to sip a cocktail as the flaming scarlet horizon sucks up the last of the daylight, and then muse under the smear of the Milky Way until I get around to starting the evening's movie. And I like to be able to say, at any moment, "*Well, enough of this,*" and pack up for town.

That's my Dirt Cheap Desert Homestead. For me, common mope, it makes possible a life of uncluttered indolence for much of the year. It does away, for the most part, with the infernal interference of a regular job. Despite what my sister says, I still shoulder some adult-like responsibilities, but only those of my choosing, rather than those thrust upon me by others.

The true hardship of desert living — summertime — I avoid entirely by leaving the vicinity. Why stay? Why not summer in temperate Northern California, where I know a thousand places to camp for free in the woodsy mountains? There's the bay or ocean, to ply with the sailboat. Or maybe, if there's extra ready, a cheap air ticket to an exotic venue? And meanwhile, the cheap desert homestead quietly solarizes in the inferno. The land rests and takes a breath, and probably thanks me for being such an easy-going steward.

The Letter

You can skip this if you want, since it isn't really about homesteading. I've been an itinerant in the workplace, bouncing from job to job as I got the pink slip or the lay off notice. Until now, I'd loaf for awhile between jobs, and then start the search for something else. This is an excerpt from a letter I wrote after one lay off. It's kind of amusing, so I throw it in.

Yo Birney,

Since being downsized by (my corporate employer) a few months ago, I've come to realize that I don't have time for a job. I don't know how I ever managed to fit a cumbersome, chronophaging work ethic into my crowded life? Unemployed, I have been busy every moment, without even eight minutes (much less, eight hours) to spare for a boss' agenda.

Initially, I thought that being mowed down in the recession's first wave would leave me with time hanging on my hands like training weights. Instead, I'm amazed that anybody is able to organize a life that includes (as mine once did) a freeway commute followed by the usual eight/five holding down a pod amidst countless other drones, all with foreheads spot-welded to the tube.

Now, if I review my day, I find no gap where I could shoehorn a remunerate effort. It's not that I've become a lazy slugabed, either. I arise as always when first light hits the window. Nor do I dally over the coffee pot and the crossword puzzle.

Here's what happened.

After being dismissed abruptly, corporate-style, I admit to being a little miffed about how easily the company dispensed with services that the day before had commanded a living wage. During these first weeks, I began to take long morning walks, to replay in my mind all the events leading up to the catastrophe, and to mull the appropriate revenge.

The autumnal air was brisk, the trees changing hue. The county watershed hard by my apartment complex afforded interesting trails. The morning mile of my past began to stretch out incrementally until today the minimum daily requirement afoot has lengthened to two hours. Opium-like endorphins flood my brain and trigger Coleridgesque reverie. A few months of these long morning rambles and my paunch melted. I'm lean as a hickory, and my aging integument, which had just begun to accumulate all the ordinary crotchety aches, now feels, not youthful by a long shot, but pleasantly well-tuned. In a very short time, it has become obvious that a long walk every morning is vital for my well-being and mustn't be shouldered aside by bagatelle.

On the way home from the walking trial, I pass the neighborhood shopping center, which is typical in every way, with the usual mix of corporate outlets (Albertsons, Rite-Aid), except, that to combat an outbreak of skateboarders and the teenage Yodudes, the management has taken to playing over the loudspeaker a repertoire of classical music. This has exterminated the teens. A Korean doughnut shop offers comfortable al fresco seating and a cup of Joe for 60¢. An additional two bits delivers a large bundle of reading matter. Nothing could be more pleasant than to listen to Mozart in a milieu free of obnoxious youths, sip a restorative beverage, and muse an hour over the panopoly of far-flung events. It's the best time to do it, too, since the lingering exercise hormones dilute the choler I used to feel at breakfast over the world's repetitive idiocy.

The point here though is that by the time I get back to the apartment I share with a female comrade, lunchtime already has arrived. As you know, Jan used to be a teacher, but lately she has thrown that over to retrain at college for a job as a dental artisan. At first, she showed signs

of alarm at my professional setback, since her own income at the moment depends on student loans. But now, she too marvels that I ever had time for a job.

Back at home, a peanut butter sandwich, a glass of water, and a drowsy languor steals over me.

When this feeling overtook me in the workplace, I would head upstairs to the cafeteria to re-caffeinate. Now the couch beckons. I settle a pillow under my head... A million words have been written in praise of naps, and I needn't add any. But isn't it the finest sort of snooze, to drift off in the droning afternoon?

It so happens that bookcases surround the living room couch. These carry the usual collection of volumes that any two college-educated adults will accumulate, plus hundreds more purchased over the years with good intentions, but which remain unread. When I wake up, my eye immediately falls on the spines of books that at one time I very much wanted to read. It's only natural to take one down for a minute, which becomes another...

Now I can't see how I could have existed without this interlude of several hours of serious reading for pleasure. It's an indispensable part of a full life and can't be squeezed aside for annoying martinets and pointless meetings.

Jan returns from her class around four, and since my layoff we have taken up the habit of tea. We aren't Anglophiles at all, and probably aren't taking tea properly anyway. It's just the teapot and some homemade biscotti. But what usually happens is that the table talk turns to some mild dispute over this or that: the preferred pronunciation of the word "intaglio" (-tal-yo); or where the phrase, "eat, drink and be merry" comes from (Eccles. 8:15). To get this settled, the reference books come down, and one question leads to another... Before we know it, the time has come to drape the blankets over the windows and light the candles.

We have found in the month that the candlelit dinner really is preferable to having electricity. There is never anything on TV anyway, and my battery-operated portable brings in the classic station almost as the stereo did. As I put on my sweater and mittens, Jan starts cutting cabbage for soup. Then I begin to hunt up the evening reading, (another innovation since my pink slip.) The reading sort of stands in for the saying of grace in a more religious household. Jan sets the topic ("spiritual renewal," for instance) and I try to find some appropriate lines in one of the college poetry anthologies that we have lugged around from one apartment to another for two decades. Lately, I go straight to Wordsworth, since that old gasbag pretty much had a sentiment on everything. The new-budded ritual reminded me that even though I once passed through the gut of a university, I'd never actually read Wordsworth, or any other Lake poet either, being too busy preparing myself for what I no longer have time for. Now I accompany the generic cornflakes with readings from Lords Byron and Tennyson, in place of the East Coast newspapers we no longer get.

I'm not saying here that work might not have its uses as a character-builder for youth or as a path to power for the ambitious. And even though I no longer seem to have time for a job, I'm not saying I'll never turn my hand at something again. If Golden Opportunity knocks at my door tomorrow, I suppose I'll answer.

Although if it's the landlady, I won't.

Best, Phil